SPECIAL TIME EDITION

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36
Iconic Years
and Counting

The Simpsons

AMERICA'S
FAVORITE FAMILY.
FOREVER.

CLASSIC
MOMENTS

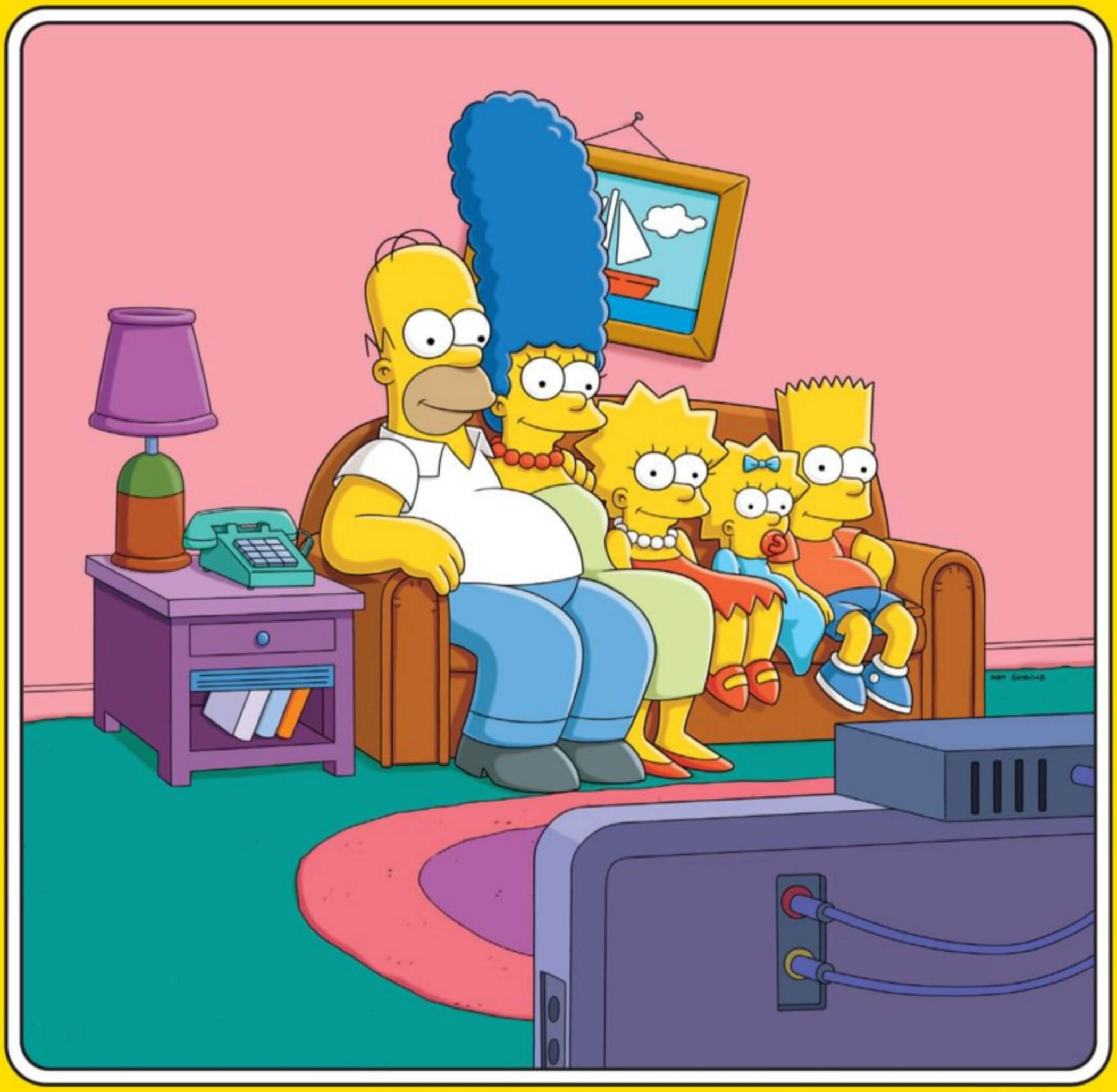
THE POWER OF
SPRINGFIELD

D'OH!
THE HOMER
CHRONICLES

TIME

The

SIMPSONS



MATT GROENING

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THIS TIME SPECIAL EDITION HAS FOUR COVERS.

MATT GROENING

Long Live *The Simpsons*

Decades after its celebrated debut, television's longest-running prime time series remains a pop culture powerhouse.

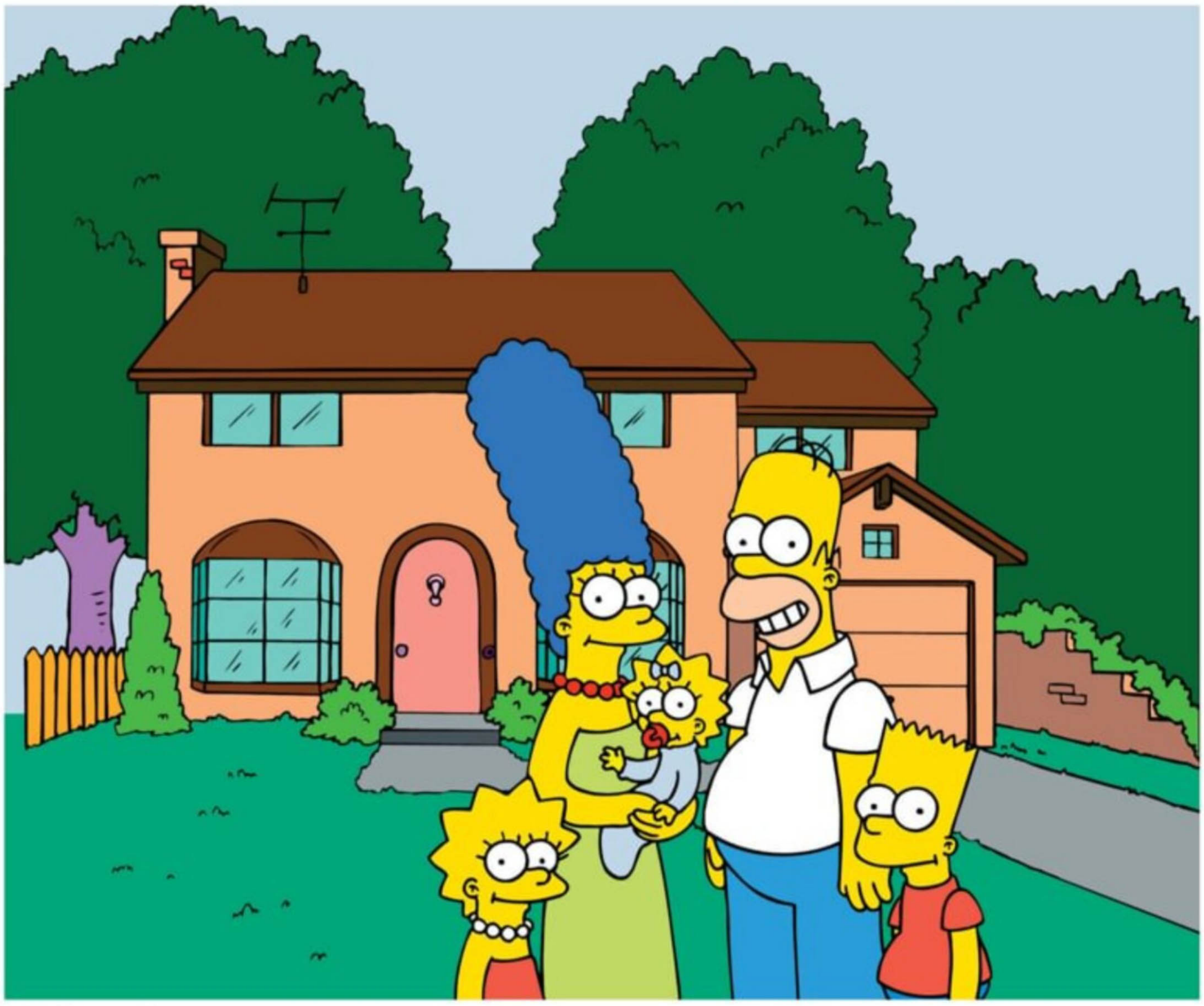
BY EILEEN DASPIN

THE OFFICIAL NAME OF *THE SIMPSONS* episode was "Behind the Laughter," but it could easily have been "Laughing All the Way to the Bank," "Dollars and Nonsense," or any number of funny-money jokes referencing the gob-smacking success of the animated sitcom. The May 2000 segment follows along as Homer films a reality-show pilot about his dysfunctional family, sells it to Fox Broadcasting, and finds that he has created a ratings phenomenon.

Cue scenes of success and excess. In one of the many meta references in "Behind the Laughter," Fox milks the moment with a merchandise bonanza (T-shirts, gin, whistles, dolls, not unlike real life). The Simpsons experience unexpected riches (not unlike *Simpsons* creators Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, and Sam Simon). The family hires a cement truck to funnel caviar into their living room. They buy MC Hammer's mansion. They use $50 bills as toilet paper. In one prolonged visual, Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie roll in piles of dollar bills, holding their sides while laughing. "They had bathtubs of money. Wheelbarrows of awards. Firehoses of respect. The Simpsons had it all," intones *My Funny Family*'s faux reality-show narrator.

When it comes to *The Simpsons*, the operative hue is not mustard yellow, like the title characters, but green, as in the color of money. In its 36-year-long life, the animated series—owned by Disney thanks to the company's 2019 acquisition of 21st Century Fox—has generated retail sales of more than $4 billion, according to some estimates. Over the years, there has been a record-breaking syndication deal, million-dollar actor salaries, $200,000 30-second commercials, and a movie that grossed $536 million on a budget of $75 million. In April

MATT GROENING



2025, Fox (where new episodes continue to premiere) announced that the show would extend its ludicrously long run through 2028–29, bringing the total to 40 seasons, with possibly as many as 900 episodes.

The family from Springfield sits atop an IP empire that just keeps on giving. In 2025, fans can visit Springfield at Universal Studios in California and Florida, where they can also quaff Duff beer (Homer's favorite brand) at the Duff Brewery and shop at the Kwik-E-Mart (the family's favorite convenience store). At home, devotees can binge *The Simpsons* on Disney+, or they can get sucked into any of the cross-promotional mini films that Disney uses to publicize properties like Star Wars and Marvel, such as "The Good, the Bart and the Loki," in which MCU antihero Loki visits the Simpsons in Springfield, and "Rogue Not Quite One," in which Maggie evades the Galactic Empire in a flying pram.

The series' financial prowess is one reflection of its stars' Sasquatch-size cultural footprint. Created in the subversive tradition of the Beatles' trippy 1968 musical *Yellow Submarine, The Simpsons* started life as 30-second cartoonlettes on Fox's *The Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987. Like *Yellow Submarine*, *The Simpsons* was absurd, satirical, pun-filled, and bawdy. When the show became a full-fledged series at the end of 1989, it raised the bar for televised cartoons and elevated viewer expectations for animated satire.

The Simpsons also helped establish the fledgling Fox network, and paved the way for *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *BoJack Horseman,* and countless other adult animated series. *The Simpsons* was highbrow—with jokes about Fermat's last theorem, the most notorious equation in the history of mathematics, and references to Hieronymus Bosch and the Algonquin Round Table. It

The "Treehouse of Horror" episodes (including the 2016 installment, above) are one of the show's most beloved traditions. Opposite: The first family of funny.

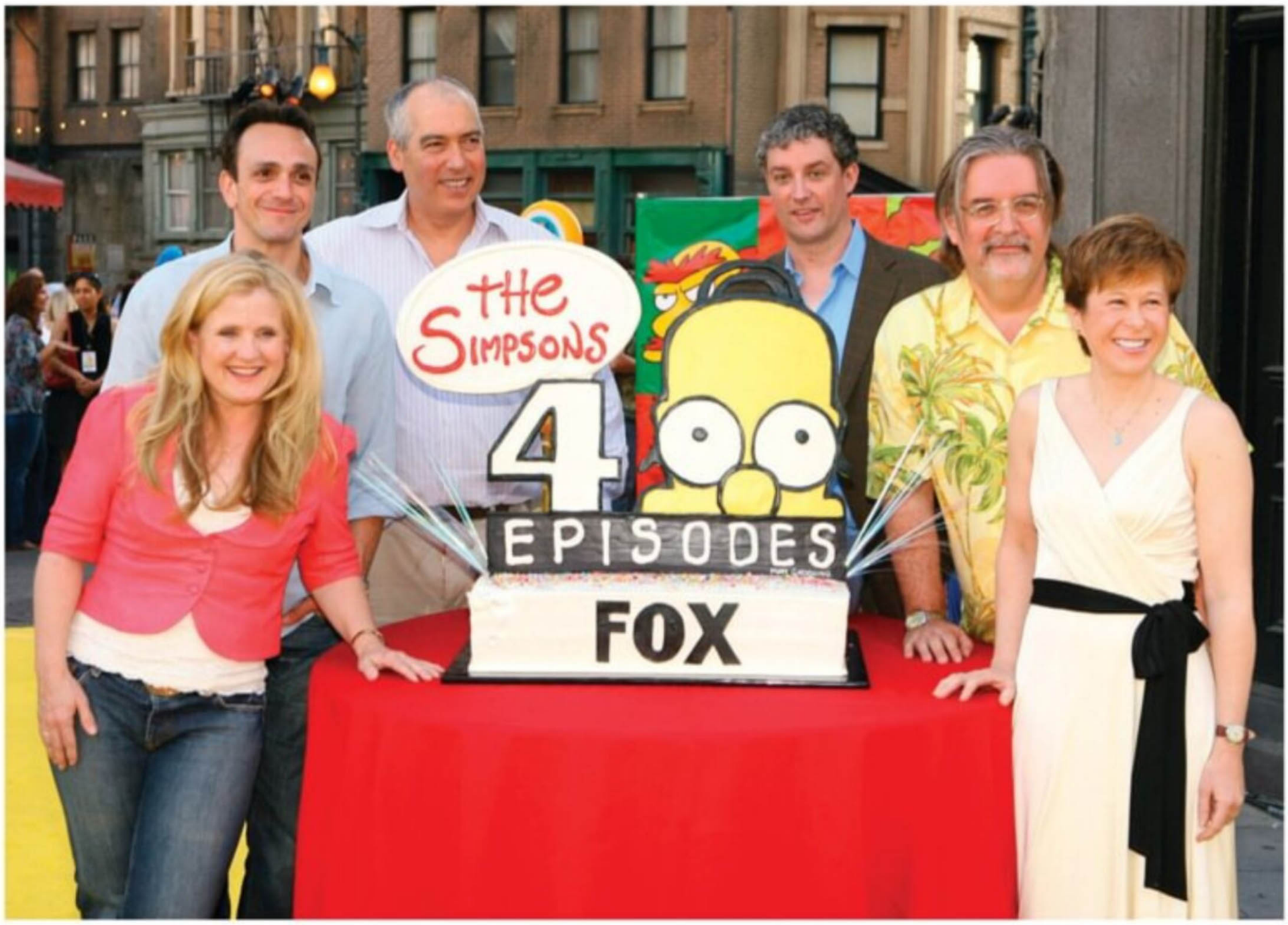
was also lowbrow, coining ungrammatical words like *embiggened* and showcasing the slapstick violence of the "Itchy & Scratchy" cartoons that Bart and Lisa watch. In 1990, first lady Barbara Bush called the show "the dumbest thing I've ever seen." It spoofed the nuclear family, nuclear power, and going nuclear, which is how you might describe Homer's rage issues.

After a period of diminished buzz—the exact time frame depends on who you ask—*The Simpsons* has returned to front and center, earning kudos from viewers and critics. Its writers "are putting out some of the most ambitious, poignant, and funny episodes in the show's history," raved Vulture in 2023, pointing out that the streaming era had allowed a younger generation to discover the show. The new audience, in turn, bolsters "the sense that the show, once left for dead by critics, may really go on forever."

These days, *The Simpsons* is cited regularly as an uncanny predictor of current events. It is back as a reliable generator of memes and GIFs—Homer Walking Backward into the Bush; Old Man Yells at Cloud; Ha Ha!; Am I So Out of Touch?—and eerily in tune with the zeitgeist. In 2024, the Simpsons visited a fancy resort in "The Yellow Lotus," spoofing HBO's buzzy series *The White Lotus*, and used AI to generate an entire episode.

Not that there aren't *Simpsons* naysayers. Some indignant fans refuse to watch the show anymore and, its renaissance notwithstanding, insist that its golden age is long gone. ("When the very first episode aired in 1989, viewers agreed on one thing: It wasn't as funny as it used to be," Conan O'Brien, a former *Simpsons* writer, once joked.) Ratings and ad rates continue to drop (current viewership is about 1.5 million per week), and there are some complaints that the show is *too* topical.

But the decline is in line with all of broadcast television. That the show remains in production is a source of wonder and despair for golden-era curmudgeons, as the *Guardian* opined in late 2024, adding that "some aficionados argue that the series is undergoing a modern renaissance, a second golden age after the struggles of the middle seasons."



Nancy Cartwright (Bart), Hank Azaria (Moe, Chief Wiggum, and more), Fox president Gary Newman, executive producer Al Jean, creator Matt Groening, and Yeardley Smith (Lisa) celebrated the 400th episode in 2007.

BY THE TIME *THE SIMPSONS* DEBUTED in December 1989, ABC, CBS, and NBC had been laying the groundwork for edgier prime time material for almost 20 years. In the 1970s, there was *All in the Family*, which tackled taboo topics such as race and gender. In the 1980s, *The Golden Girls* undermined notions about older women. In 1989, a pilot for a sitcom called *The Seinfeld Chronicles* introduced a show about nothing. Fox, attempting to muscle in on the legacy networks, was pushing boundaries even further in 1987 with *Married…with Children*, a crude and racy comedy about the maladjusted Bundy family, and *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, credited with pioneering the fourth-wall-breaking meta sitcom genre (it starred comedian Garry Shandling playing a version of himself).

What didn't exist was an animated prime time vehicle to pick up where the Bundys and Shandling left off. In fact, when *The Simpsons* moved to Sunday nights at 8 p.m., there hadn't been a network prime time cartoon since 1966, when the prehistoric denizens of Bedrock, *The Flintstones*, went off the air. For the most part, cartoons in the late 1980s were kids-only programming, the purview of Saturday morning. There was a variety of content and visual approaches—*The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, *Jem and the Holograms*, *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, and *Transformers*—but the shows were almost uniformly drawn in the style of the big three: Disney, Warner Bros., and Hanna-Barbera. They were polished and glossy and earnest.

The programming gap shrank in 1990. With its outrageous irreverence, twist on TV tropes, and seriously flawed characters, *The Simpsons* was an almost immediate success. There were viewing parties, *Simpsons* slang, Bartmania, and a boatload of merchandise. The show garnered so much buzz, Fox quickly moved it to Thursdays at 8 p.m., where it competed against NBC's

With its outrageous irreverence, twist on TV tropes, and seriously flawed characters, *The Simpsons* was an almost immediate success.

top-rated *The Cosby Show*. By Season 3 (1991–92), *The Simpsons* had fully hit its stride, with a reliable mix of slapstick shtick, brainy and dumb plot twists, celebrity cameos, and a Little Guy versus the Man mentality. Many of those episodes are still considered among the show's best, like "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington," when Lisa wins a trip to D.C. and is dismayed by corruption in the capital, and "Radio Bart," when a Bart prank backfires in the mode of the Boy Who Cried Wolf and annoyed Springfield residents refuse to help him in his hour of need. "Flaming Moe's" is perhaps one of the best episodes of the show's entire run. In it, Moe Szyslak, the owner of Moe's Tavern, takes credit for a drink Homer invented (secret ingredient: children's cough syrup); the bar becomes a magnet for locals and celebrities, and Homer becomes unhinged at his friend's betrayal. The episode not only includes a cameo by Aerosmith, but it coined one of the most famous lines on the show—"It's like there's a party in my mouth, and everyone's invited"—which is still quoted today.

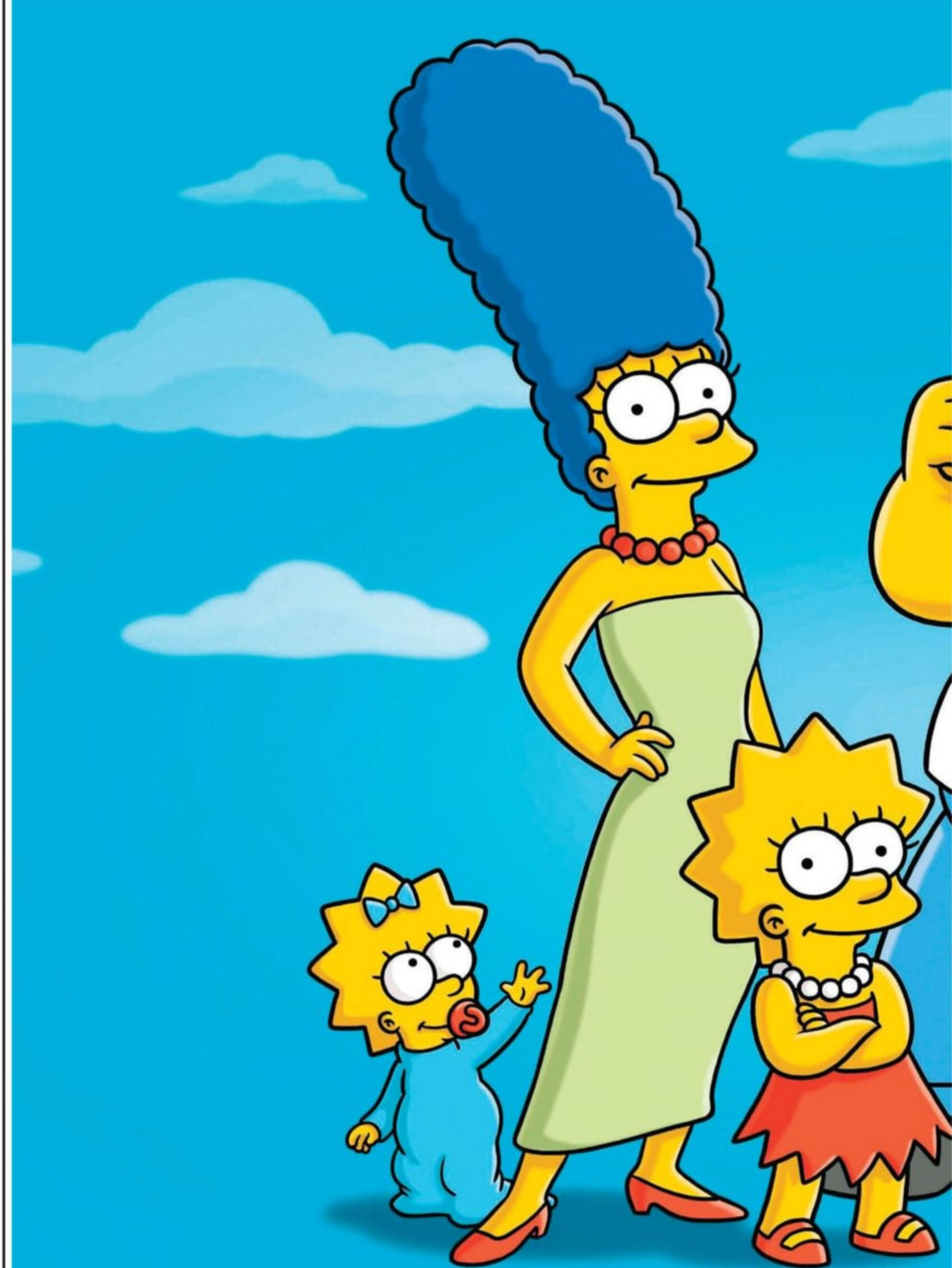
Ironically, for all *The Simpsons*' influence, the show was a loss leader for Fox, costing the network more to produce than it attracted in advertising. Yet those losses were more than offset by the revenue generated through licensing deals. Just how much revenue was hinted at in 1991, when Tracey Ullman filed a lawsuit against Fox claiming that the network had earned an estimated $50 million in profits from merchandising the cartoon family and that she was entitled to a percentage of that sum—$2.25 million, to be exact—for having nurtured *The Simpsons* on her variety program. ("I breastfed those little devils," Ullman quipped at the 1990 EmmyAwards.) Ullman lost the suit after 18 months, with the jury deliberating for less than five hours before rejecting her claim.

Part of *The Simpsons*' appeal was how effectively it got under the establishment's skin. Conservative pundits accused the show of corrupting America's morals and precipitating cultural decay. Several schools banned Bart merchandise, citing his bad attitude ("Underachiever and proud of it, man"), and JCPenney pulled T-shirts bearing the 10-year-old's bug-eyed visage from shelves.

The Simpsons' creative team leaned into the criticism, embracing the characters' vices. Bart was consistently bratty and defiant, Lisa arrogant, and Marge killjoy numero uno. Many viewers thought Homer got progressively more offensive—more gluttonous, more selfish—as seasons went on. Intentionally or not, it seemed Groening, Brooks, and Simon were onto something: the creation of the animated sitcom antihero, a character without idealism, maturity, or traditional heroic qualities. Consider the next animated hit to come along, in 1993: MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head*. The foul-mouthed slacker teens spent their days watching music videos, listening to heavy metal, and sniggering. They were crude. They were nihilistic and misogynistic. And they were the highest-rated show on MTV, beloved for their idiocy.

The list of animated antiheroes that followed goes on and on. There's Eric Cartman of *South Park*, a show described as politically incorrect, twisted, and sick. Cartman, 10 years old (like Bart), is short-tempered and aggressive (not unlike Homer). In various episodes, he tries to kill hippies, dresses as Hitler, and fakes his way into the Special Olympics. Peter Griffin, the celebrated protagonist of *Family Guy*, is ignorant and tone-deaf; BoJack Horseman, the equine hero of the Netflix show of the same name, is brash, boorish, and sexist.

But the thing about all these antiheroes, Homer included, is that their bad behavior is funny—often laugh-out-loud so. Same for Bart and Marge and Lisa (maybe not Maggie, as she almost never speaks). Among other accolades, *The Simpsons* has been called "The Best TV Show of the 20th Century" by TIME and has even been praised by the Vatican for its philosophical leanings. For his part, Homer has been dubbed "the most influential wordsmith since Shakespeare" for coining expressions such as "D'oh," his signature grunt of frustration; "America Junior," how he once referred to Canada; and his description of Florida as "America's wang." Tasteful? Definitely not. Inappropriate? Maybe. But always memorable. As Bart might say, "Don't have a cow, man." □



Role Call

Meet the residents of 742 Evergreen Terrace and their Springfield neighbors.

BY RICH SANDS

MATT GROENING

HOMER

VOICED BY
DAN
CASTELLANETA

EVERYONE'S FAVORITE (if wildly incompetent) nuclear power plant employee may not be the smartest, fittest, or most sophisticated guy, and he can be prone to reckless outbursts and terrible decision-making (his ridiculous idea for a new car ended up bankrupting the successful automobile company that his long-lost brother had built). But at his core, he's a loving husband and father who always seems to do the right thing in the end. "There's an emotional obstacle course he's running in the course of a single sentence," series creator Matt Groening told *Entertainment Weekly* in 2010, when the magazine named Homer the greatest pop culture character of the previous 20 years. "People can relate to Homer because we're all secretly propelled by desires we can't admit to. Homer is launching himself headfirst into every single impulsive thought that occurs to him. His love of whatever has caught his eye is a joy to witness."

MARGE

VOICED BY
JULIE
KAVNER

RECENTLY DECREED the "nicest lady in Springfield" by Mayor Quimby, Marge Simpson (née Bouvier) is the calming core of the family, thanks to her selfless dedication to making sure everyone's needs come before her own. "There are a lot of reasons to love Marge," TIME wrote when the raspy-voiced, blue-haired matriarch made our 2008 list of the 10 Best Moms. "Her heart is as big as her hair. She's sweet, simple, unflappable, and, like Edith Bunker before her, she uses her goodness as a shield from the crudeness of her husband and the never-ending needs of her kids." Though Marge is often unassuming, it would be foolish to underestimate her value. To wit: When she briefly went to prison for accidentally shoplifting a bottle of bourbon from the Kwik-E-Mart, she couldn't contribute her famous marshmallow squares to a bake sale. That triggered a chain of events that quickly turned Springfield into an apocalyptic wasteland.

MATT GROENING

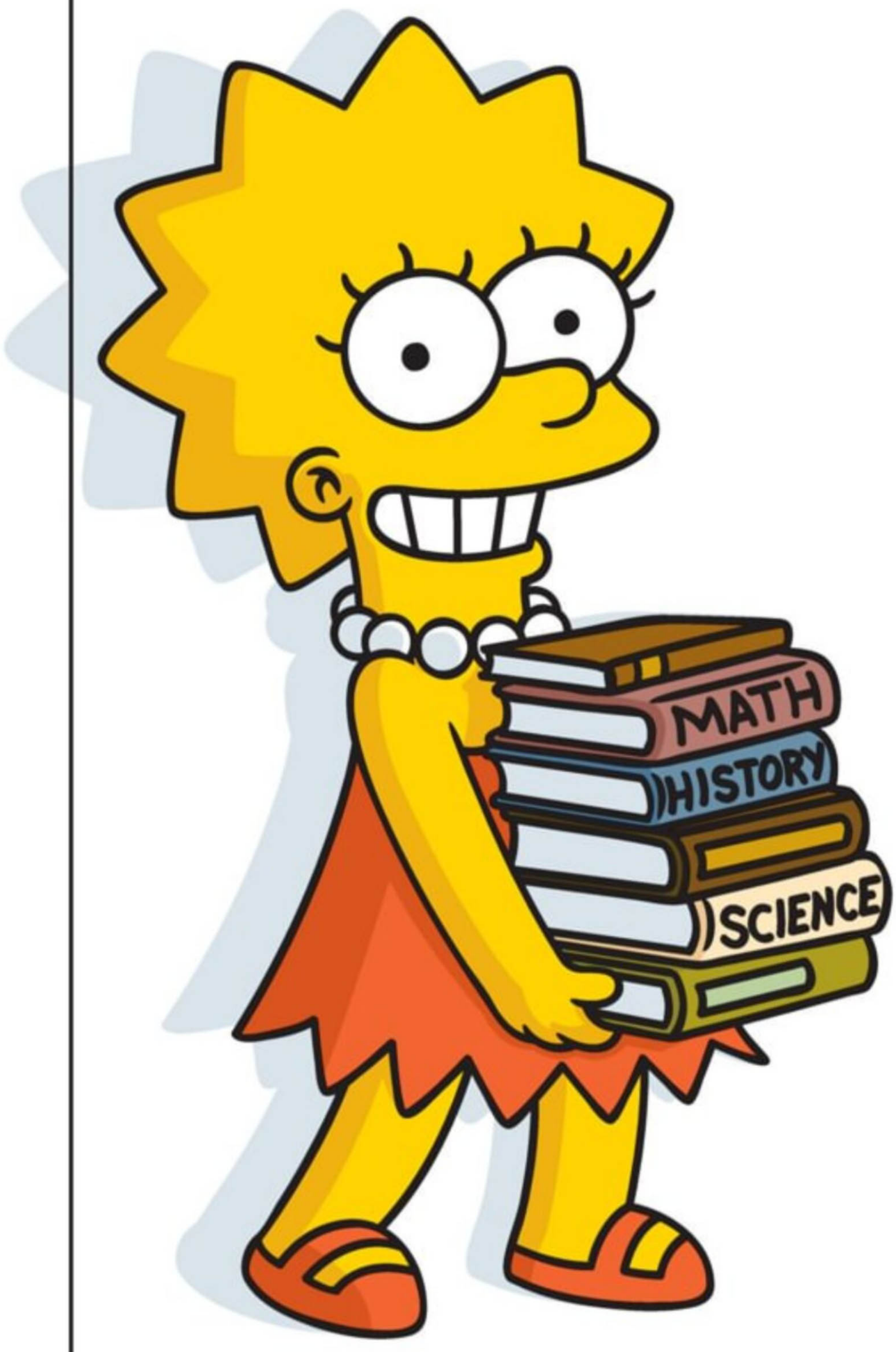
BART

VOICED BY
NANCY
CARTWRIGHT

HE MAY BE MARGE'S "special little guy," but to the rest of Springfield he is (as he once remarked) "this century's Dennis the Menace." A mischievous prankster, the 10-year-old Bartholomew J. Simpson has mercilessly taunted Homer and Lisa at home, Principal Skinner at school, and Moe at his own place of business with an endless string of prank calls (tricking the hapless barkeep into loudly asking for patrons with unfortunate names like Jacques Strap and Hugh Jass). When the series debuted, Bart immediately became a pop culture sensation, with his many catchphrases ("Don't have a cow, man!," "Eat my shorts," etc.) emblazoned on T-shirts and other merchandise. His unruly behavior made him a regular in detention at Springfield Elementary, where he opens many episodes scrawling lines on the chalkboard repeatedly as punishment. In one early episode, his message couldn't have been further from the ultimate truth: "I will not get very far with this attitude."

LISA

VOICED BY
YEARDLEY SMITH



THE SMARTEST character on *The Simpsons*, 8-year-old Lisa is also the heart, soul, and moral center of the show. Inquisitive, principled, and (usually) patient with the ignorant people around her, she is rarely afraid to stand up for what she believes in. Among her many crusades, she took on the sexist stereotypes of the Barbie-like Malibu Stacy doll and called out corruption in Washington, D.C. Even in her imagination she achieves the impossible, once daydreaming a future in which, she recounts, "that's how I cured all disease, ended war, and reunited the cast of TV's *Facts of Life*, including longtime holdout Tootie." Well-rounded Lisa excels at school, plays the saxophone, and enjoys horseback riding—but she also struggles to make friends and fit in with her peers. "She cares and feels so deeply about things," former *Simpsons* writer David X. Cohen told *Vanity Fair* in 2018. "It's great for developing dramatic storylines. If you believe Lisa truly cares about something, then you will, too."

MATT GROENING

MAGGIE

SHE RARELY SPEAKS, but the baby of the family has frequently played a prominent role in the show. She famously led a revolt at the Ayn Rand School for Tots daycare center, craftily reclaiming all of the confiscated pacifiers in a sequence reminiscent of a *Mission: Impossible* heist. And, of course, it was Maggie who was the (accidental) culprit in the two-part "Who Shot Mr. Burns?" cliffhanger. (The mean-spirited tycoon was literally trying to take candy from a baby, and in the ensuing scuffle his gun went off.) When she did say her first word ("Daddy"), it was Academy Award–winning actress Elizabeth Taylor who stepped into the recording booth. In a sign of Maggie's prestige, others who have voiced the character include another Oscar winner, Jodie Foster, plus nominees James Earl Jones (in a "Treehouse of Horror" parody) and Carol Kane.

THE TOWNIES

Hundreds of characters have shown up in Springfield over the years. Here are some all-time favorites.

MOE SZYSLAK

CHIEF WIGGUM

COMIC BOOK GUY

PROFESSOR FRINK

MATT GROENING

VOICED BY

HANK AZARIA

MANY OF YOUR FAVORITE *Simpsons* characters spring from the voices of two men, Hank Azaria and Harry Shearer (next page). Azaria (who is best known in live action for the film *The Birdcage* and playing Phoebe's boyfriend David on *Friends*) is behind the characters above, as well as Superintendent Chalmers, quack doctor Nick Riviera, Pedro Chespirito (Bumblebee Man), Horatio McCallister (the Sea Captain), and many others.

MR. BURNS

WAYLON SMITHERS

NED FLANDERS

PRINCIPAL SKINNER

REVERAND LOVEJOY

KENT BROCKMAN

VOICED BY

HARRY SHEARER

A *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE* VET who has starred in acclaimed mockumentaries *This Is Spinal Tap* and *A Mighty Wind*, the vocally dexterous Shearer is ubiquitous on *The Simpsons*. "Harry is enormously proud that he plays both the nicest guy in Springfield (Flanders) and the meanest (Mr. Burns), as well as providing the voices of both God and Satan," wrote former *Simpsons* head writer Mike Reiss in his book *Springfield Confidential*. "That's range!"

GRAMPA ABE SIMPSON

Dan Castellaneta keeps it in the Simpson family by providing the voices for both Homer and his cantankerous father, aka the frequently rambling and confused Grampa.

SELMA AND PATTY BOUVIER

Marge's cranky chain-smoking sisters (both voiced by Julie Kavner) have never even attempted to hide their contempt for Homer—or pretty much anything besides their favorite TV show, *MacGyver*.

LENNY LEONARD AND CARL CARLSON

Nearly inseparable, the deadpan Lenny (voiced by Harry Shearer) and Carl (Alex Désert took over the role from Hank Azaria in 2020) are Homer's longtime friends and coworkers.

BARNEY GUMBLE

Another one of Homer's pals since childhood, Barney (played by Castellaneta) is a heavy drinker (since Homer turned him on to beer in high school) and perhaps best known for his epic belches.

MATT GROENING

MILHOUSE VAN HOUTEN

Bart's nerdy, long-suffering best friend (and frequent accomplice in pranking) was voiced since the beginning by Pamela Hayden, who recently retired. Kelly Macleod took over the role at the end of Season 36.

NELSON MUNTZ

The alpha bully of Springfield Elementary (played by Nancy Cartwright) has his own catchphrase ("Ha-ha!") and torments just about all his schoolmates, except for Lisa, on whom he has long had a crush.

EDNA KRABAPPEL

Bart's cynical fourth-grade teacher passed away in 2013 following the death of voice actress Marcia Wallace. She dated Principal Skinner on and off and later secretly married Ned Flanders.

GROUNDSKEEPER WILLIE

The janitor and groundskeeper at Springfield Elementary (voiced by Castellaneta) is known for his thick Scottish accent and bad temper, frequently triggered by Bart's destructive pranks.

MAYOR QUIMBY

Springfield's mayor (played by Castellaneta) has never met a bribe he wouldn't take. A prolific womanizer with a thick Boston accent, Quimby has mob ties and open disdain for his constituents.

JULIUS M. HIBBERT, M.D.

The jovial doctor (voiced by Shearer until 2021, when Kevin Michael Richardson took on the role) delivers his diagnoses—no matter how grave—with a trademark chuckle.

KRUSTY THE CLOWN

The children's TV show host (played by Castellaneta) has a playful personlity on screen but a furious temper in real life. He was estranged from his rabbi father until Bart and Lisa helped them reconcile.

AGNES SKINNER

Principal Skinner's overbearing mother is voiced by Tress MacNeille, who's been with the show since the beginning and also plays Eleanor Abernathy (aka the Crazy Cat Lady), Lindsey Naegle, and others.

MATT GROENING

CHAPTER

1

WELCOME TO SPRINGFIELD

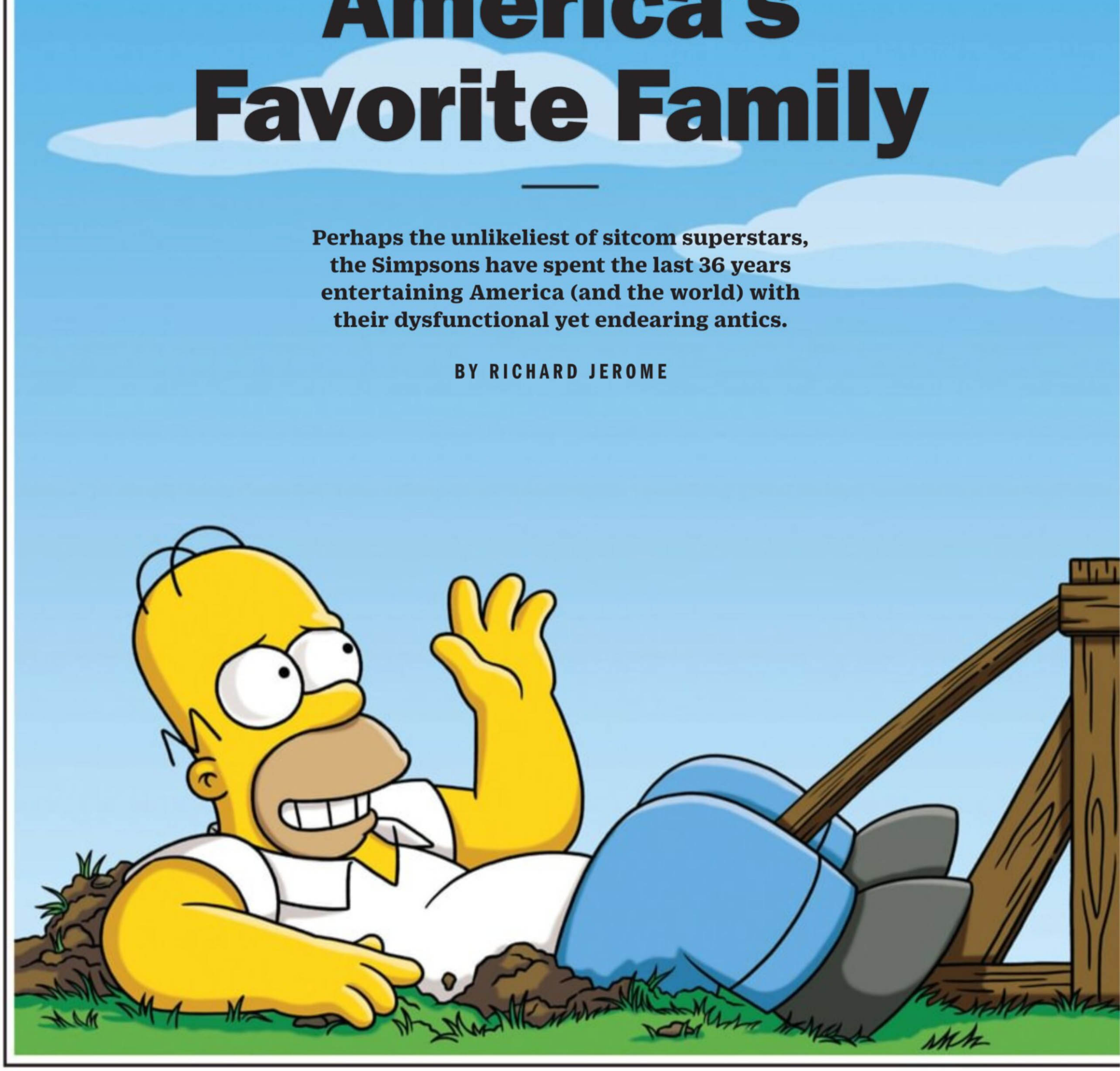
Matt Groening's unconventional cartoon creation rocketed to superstardom in the '90s and continues to rewrite the rules of prime time television.

MATT GROENING

America's Favorite Family

Perhaps the unlikeliest of sitcom superstars, the Simpsons have spent the last 36 years entertaining America (and the world) with their dysfunctional yet endearing antics.

BY RICHARD JEROME



MATT GROENING

IN THIS HIP, KNOWING, POST-POSTMODERN culture, it is difficult to remember a time before *The Simpsons*, when television families were high-functioning, heroes weren't anti-heroes, and ironic, self-referential, meta intertextuality wasn't a thing. True, in the cynical, post-Vietnam/Watergate 1970s, Norman Lear had revolutionized prime time with edgy, topical series like *All in the Family* and *Maude*. Larry Gelbart turned out the irreverent *M*A*S*H*. James L. Brooks—who would be one of *the* founding fathers of *The Simpsons*, along with cartoonist/animator/creator Matt Groening—gifted us with the witty, character-driven ensemble productions *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Taxi*. But by the 1980s, with the nation swept rightward on a wave of nostalgia, television comedy was dominated by heartwarming, innocuous family fare—with a few sharp exceptions, like *Cheers* and *Roseanne*—featuring stock characters, tame jokes (cued by laugh tracks), and often a moral to finish things off with a big group hug. *Family Ties*, *Family Matters*, *The Cosby Show*, *Full House*, *Growing Pains*—such was the sitcomedic ethos of the Reagan era.

Then, just like that, America met Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and baby Maggie Simpson, along with the idiosyncratic residents of fictional suburban Springfield. Groening's sublimely flawed—but loving and lovable—family of five had started life as a series of shorts for Fox's *The Tracey Ullman Show*, a sketch variety program starring the British actress and comic chameleon. *The Simpsons* would blossom into a series, and when the first episode premiered on Fox on December 17, 1989—a Christmas-themed show titled "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire"—the critical raves were immediate. "Couldn't be better," said the *Los Angeles Times*. "Not only exquisitely weird but also as smart and witty as television gets." The *Chicago Tribune* called *The Simpsons* "a bizarrely bug-eyed bunch and far more wicked, funny and sophisticated than what we have come to expect from cartoons." Having met these quirky but relatable folks, *USA Today* asked, "Who wants to go back to *Growing Pains*?"

Opposite, from left: Cast members Yeardley Smith, Nancy Cartwright, and Hank Azaria joined executive producer James L. Brooks, current showrunner Matt Selman, and series creator Matt Groening at a Disney+ screening in Los Angeles in 2024.

Not even the most visionary analysts of those early days, however, could have imagined that *The Simpsons* would become a cultural institution, the most enduring scripted prime time series in television history (having long ago left *Gunsmoke* in the Dodge City dust), running for 36 years and nearly 800 episodes and counting. In April 2025, Disney, which bought Twentieth Century Fox—the studio that produces the show—in 2019, renewed the series for another four years. Disney+ now features a 24/7 *Simpsons* stream, airing all the episodes in chronological order. In 1999, TIME named *The Simpsons*—"dazzlingly intelligent and unapologetically vulgar"—the best television series of the 20th century. And things were just getting started. To date, the global *Simpsons* franchise has racked up billions in merchandising and DVD sales. Meanwhile, the series has inspired an impressive list of imitators and spiritual heirs, such as Groening's own *Futurama* as well as, among others, *South Park*, *King of the Hill*, and *Family Guy*.

No one is more amazed by the show's success, longevity, and influence than the man who created it. "It's staggering," Groening says. "There's nothing like it—I mean, the classic shows that resonate with us only lasted a few seasons, right? Five or six years would be a great run."

To date, *The Simpsons* has amassed 37 Primetime Emmys and two prestigious Peabody Awards, the latest in 2020, when the citation lauded the series' tectonic impact: "Following a decade of earnest family sitcoms, *The Simpsons*' brash yellow splash onto television cleared the way for a more satiric-parodic, deeply ironic form of comedy… one still sees the impact of its witty humor and endless willingness to question authority…. It gifted us a wonderful family…that would fumble, fight, and fail and yet who loved each other in spite of it all. It boldly and inventively ushered animation into prime time. And it has found ways to remain funny, fresh, and insightful, while always trusting and respecting its audience's intelligence."

The citation also notes *The Simpsons*' contribution to American idiom. Some of those words, phrases and neologisms now embedded in our lexicon include "Don't have a cow, man," "meh," "craptacular," "Cowabunga!" and, of course, Homer's frustrated "D'oh!"—which was actually the title of a one-day course at Scotland's Glasgow University. Instructor John Donaldson took moments from *The Simpsons* and related them to philosophical questions around morality, religion, and free will and examined whether Homer is, despite his flaws, a "virtuous" character in the Aristotelian sense. It was hardly the only time *The Simpsons* has inspired academic discourse. Consider "A Gramscian and Althusserian Critique of The Simpsons," a paper by Cenk Tan, a professor at Pamukkale University in Turkey, which examines the show through the lens of Marxist philosophers Antonio Gramsci (Italian, 1891–1937) and Louis Althusser (French, 1918–1990). "The study," Tan writes in his abstract, "analyzes the famous cartoon from the perspective of class conflict and criticizes it through the window of Gramscian civil society and hegemony, while at the same time scrutinizing the work of popular culture by referring to Althusser's notion of ideological and state apparatuses… demonstrating how seriously incorporated *The Simpsons* actually is with Gramscian and Althusserian references and how these are embedded in the sub-layers of the television production." Heady stuff.

Not even the most visionary analysts could have imagined that *The Simpsons* would become the most enduring scripted prime time series in TV history.

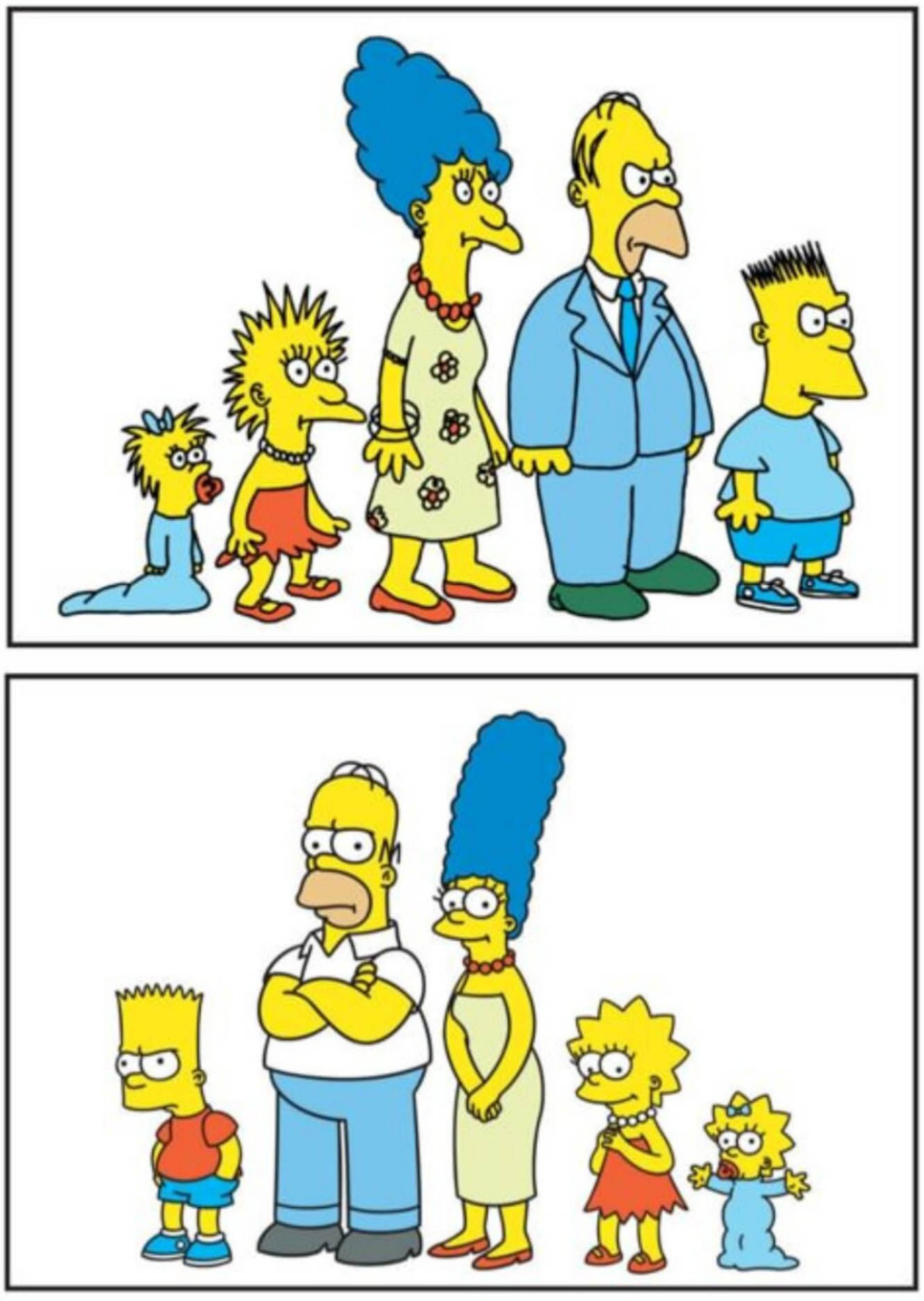
"I guess it amazes me that any parents would pay the tuition for their kids to learn about *The Simpsons* at a university," says Matt Selman, who joined the writing staff in 1997 and has been showrunner for the past four years. "I don't think our level of philosophical depth is so challenging that it requires academia to unravel it. We did parody that once—an episode where students were deconstructing Itchy

and Scratchy [an adversarial mouse and cat that feature in short cartoons-within-the-cartoon on *The Krusty the Clown Show*] in every pretentious way. I know a lot of the people working on our show went to fancy schools [many writers and producers are Ivy Leaguers, including Selman, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania; several have written for the *Harvard Lampoon*]. But, we're not a bunch of intellectual snobs. Well, maybe [we're] pseudo-intellectual slobs."

For his part, Groening attended the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, which he has described as "a hippie college, with no grades or required classes, that drew every weirdo in the Northwest." Raised in Portland, Oregon, Groening moved to Los Angeles in 1977 and steeped himself in punk counterculture while holding a motley assortment of survival jobs—chauffeur, landscaper at a sewage treatment plant, waiter at Whiskey-a-Go-Go—before earning a modest living for a dozen years with his scrawly comic strip *Life in Hell*. A mordant satire on life in L.A., the strip featured Binky, an angst-ridden anthropomorphic rabbit, and, among others, his illegitimate son, Bongo, and Akbar and Jeff, identical fez-wearing gay brothers—or were they lovers?

Life in Hell had a subversive sensibility familiar to *Simpsons* fans. As John Ortved points out in his 2009 book *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History*, Binky was "a victim with forces working against him, like Reaganite social values, the religious Right commercialism, teachers and bosses. The cartoons reeked of depression, death, and fear."

What's not to like?



The Simpsons characters evolved from early sketches by David Silverman to their Tracey Ullman Show *debut to their current design.*

ONE ADMIRER OF *LIFE IN HELL* WAS JAMES L. BROOKS, and that was no small thing in the 1980s—or ever. Aside from his stunning TV successes, which included *Mary Tyler Moore* spinoffs *Rhoda* and *Lou Grant*, Brooks had also cracked the big-screen elite with 1983's *Terms of Endearment*, which earned him an Oscars trifecta—best picture, writer, and director. Known as the Dark Prince of Comedy for his uncanny knack for finding humor in bleakness, Brooks asked Groening to contribute ideas for a set of short interstitial animated spots on a then-unspecified project that turned out to be *The Tracey Ullman Show*. In 1985, Groening showed up at Brooks' Gracie Productions, where he essentially invented the Simpsons characters in the producer's lobby.

"It was in a little bungalow on the Fox lot, and you know if you read any of the press at the time everybody was predicting that Fox would not work, and so I figured whatever I came up with might sort of disappear," Groening recalls. "I really liked my *Life in Hell* characters, but I couldn't think of what they would sound like in my head, and the idea of having to figure that out was daunting. So I made up characters that were based on my family—not their personalities so much, but their names. Homer is named after my father, Marge for my mother, Margaret—when the characters became famous, people started calling her Marge. I have two younger sisters, Lisa and Maggie—I have another brother and sister too, but I thought three kids was enough. And Bart was sort of a stand-in for me—I thought it would be kind of egotistical to name one of the characters after myself."

Of course, Bart (voiced by Nancy Cartwright) became a nationwide sensation—irreverent, subversive, anti-authoritarian, but with a conscience and a loving heart. Within a year after *The Simpsons* debuted, Bart landed on the cover of *TIME*; a decade later, the magazine named the perennial 10-year-old one of the 20th century's 100 most influential people. "He is a complex weave of grace, attitude and personality, deplorable and adorable," the late Richard Corliss wrote.

"You know, Bart's reputation is as the biggest prankster of them all and all that stuff," Groening says. "But I always thought of Bart as a kid who, like me, was bored by school, and in order to keep himself entertained, he would lighten things up. Obviously he was a misguided kid—he got it wrong over and over again. The hard thing about writing for Bart is to come up with stuff that kids won't imitate."

Over the past 25 years, Homer (Dan Castellaneta) has been arguably the show's dominant character: a gluttonous, beer-chugging Everyman American dad, working a lousy job—at a nuclear plant—for a terrible boss (Mr. Burns), a sacrifice he makes to support the children he adores and the wife he's still crazy about after all these years. "Homer's a guy who's ruled by his impulses, and I think he's completely relatable because he loves what he loves

with all his heart," Groening says. "Where the rest of us feel guilty about our bad habits and love of doughnuts and beer, Homer has no conflicts about that. Meanwhile, life's just kicking him in the ass, and he doesn't know who's doing it. And I think we can also relate to that."

Julie Kavner's raspy-voiced Marge, Groening says, "is the nervous mom who has the difficulty of being married to Homer, who she's in love with, but, you know, he's…well, erratic. She's trying to keep things in line, and she's a stay-at-home mom, which was a sitcom staple when I was growing up, but also that's how I remember my mother. By the way, Marge's hairdo was actually inspired by my mother's in the '60s—she had a very tall beehive at one point. Obviously, the cartoon version is highly exaggerated—and partly influenced by Elsa Lanchester as the Bride of Frankenstein."

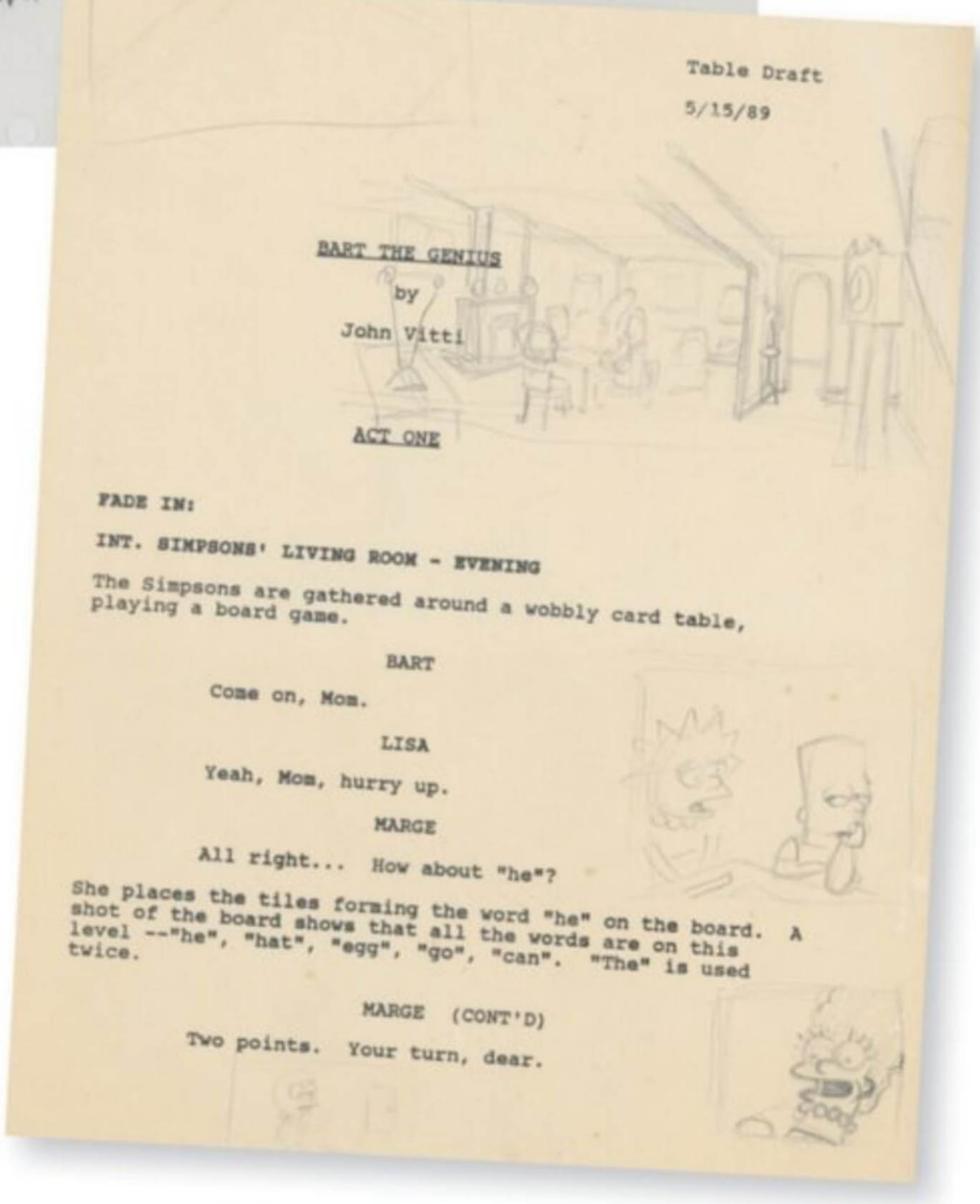


Table Draft

5/15/89

BART THE GENIUS

by

John Vitti

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

INT. SIMPSONS' LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The Simpsons are gathered around a wobbly card table, playing a board game.

BART

Come on, Mom.

LISA

Yeah, Mom, hurry up.

MARGE

All right... How about "he"?

She places the tiles forming the word "he" on the board. A shot of the board shows that all the words are on this level --"he", "hat", "egg", "go", "can". "The" is used twice.

MARGE (CONT'D)

Two points. Your turn, dear.

Early sketches for the opening title sequence and the script to the second episode, "Bart the Genius" (opposite). The exact location of Springfield (below) has never been specified.

Brilliant, warmhearted Lisa (Yeardley Smith) "is the sensitive, talented woman in the family," says Groening. A stellar student who plays a mean jazz baritone sax, "She's a sweetheart, and it's so much fun to have her be the outsider—the vegetarian, the Buddhist, the earnest social justice warrior. And the real fun of it is that she's only 8 years old. My sister Lisa said, 'Thank you for basing this character on me,' and you know, she's the only member of the family who has thanked me!"

Of course, these fleshed-out, nuanced characters didn't spring full-blown from Groening's head. They represent years of teamwork. "Yes," Groening says, "that's one thing I'd really like to get across to people—that *The Simpsons* is definitely a collaborative effort."

NOT THAT EVERYONE ON THE TEAM INItially greeted the project with cockeyed optimism.

"There was a kind of a fatalistic cynicism, because no one expected the Fox network to succeed," Groening says. "And there really hadn't been any kind of prime time animated TV series for a decade or two, back to the '60s with *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, *Top Cat*. But when I say cynical fatalism, that didn't apply to me—I thought *The Simpsons* was going to be a hit, though I didn't know what that meant because I had no experience in television. But I knew how important *The Flintstones* was to me when I was a kid, to have a cartoon you could watch at night. There was a whole generation of TV executives who didn't think that prime time animation worked, but finally, my guess is that there were enough people who had grown up watching *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* and who ended up working at Fox who said, 'Oh yeah, let's try it.' What was great was that at Fox they were so willing to throw whatever it was at the wall to see what would work."

Brooks & Co. initially told Groening they were looking for two-minute animation sequences for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. "Then they came back and said, actually, it's one minute, and then they said no, no, it's four 15-second pieces of animation to pepper throughout the episode," Groening says. "It seemed impossible, and the mission I gave myself at the time talking with the animators was to be as classically visual as possible, doing physical slapstick gags and making it very percussive. That and Bart's sassy attitude are what kicked it off."

Groening says that because much of the original writing staff assumed the whole thing would

MATT GROENING

MATT GROENING

The series kicked off with "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire," above. Right: The Season 1 episode "Life on the Fast Lane" won the show its first Emmy Award in 1990.

fizzle, it stoked creativity in the cramped room where they'd meet to kick around ideas. "They were quite relaxed about it," he explains, "and they were willing to pitch crazy jokes because they weren't trying to make it successful—they just wanted to be funny."

As it turned out, the animated shorts were a hit with viewers—when some of them were aired before a theatrical showing of a film, the audience broke into applause as soon as the opening titles came on screen. Fox offered the *Simpsons* team a prime time special, which Brooks and Groening turned down, and after more dickering finally agreed to a full 13-episode deal, without a pilot.

The enterprise, however, did not get off to an auspicious start. After the producers put together a debut episode, they shipped it to South Korea, where it was being animated—this was in the days before electronic transmission enabled instant delivery. "We got back the results of the first episode, and it was a disaster," Groening recalls. "Whatever minimal charm the *Tracey Ullman* shorts had disappeared, because it turned out that some of the animators didn't think they were funny, so they added their own jokes—and they were not good jokes. For example, there was a scene in which Bart and Homer are having an argument, and the way it was staged was Bart is on the left side of the screen, Homer is on the right side of the screen, and be-

tween them is a picture hanging on the wall of a horse's ass with its tail up and stink lines coming from the bottom of the frame."

The episode had to be completely retooled. "We got the second batch of animation a week later, and it was great, it was funny and charming and primitive, as were all those early episodes, and it was really a blast," Groening says.

Because of the delay, *The Simpsons* premiere was postponed from September 1989 until that December (hence the show would debut with the Christmas-themed episode). "The amazing thing was how fast it caught on in the U.S.," Groening says. "By the summer of 1990, there were bootleg T-shirts of Bart all over the place, particularly in Los Angeles and New York, where they were on every street corner, it seemed like. Then various subcultures took over the show and made it their own, Black Bart T-shirts and vegetarian Bart T-shirts saying 'Don't eat a cow, man.'"

Indeed, Bartmania had swept the nation. The spiky-haired hellion was not only on the cover of TIME, but also *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone*. The merchandizing juggernaut went into overdrive—after a deal with Mattel, talking Bart dolls started flying off the shelves.

Those early days were heady and freewheeling under the direction of Brooks, Groening, and showrunner Sam Simon, a cartoonist and brilliant comic writer who had worked on animated shows as well as *Cheers*, *Taxi,* and *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. Simon wielded an incalculable influence in shaping *The Simpsons'* attitude and sensibility, as well as developing some of the major secondary recurring characters, including as Mr. Burns, Homer's malevolent boss at the nuclear plant; kindly town doctor Julius Hibbert; and Clancy Wiggum, Springfield's slovenly police chief. "In the beginning, I was skeptical it could be successful, but I was not skeptical it could be good," Simon, who died in 2015, told *Stanford Magazine* of the show. "I was hoping for 13 episodes that my friends would like. It's a good lesson, isn't it? If you do something trying to make your friends laugh and that you can be proud of, you can also be successful."

In the beginning, *The Simpsons* raised a backlash among conservatives as an assault on traditional values. At the 1992 Republican National Convention, President George H.W. Bush vowed to make families "a lot more like the Waltons"—a close-knit Depression-era clan living in Virginia—"and a lot less like the Simpsons." Of course, the *Simpsons* writers couldn't let that one go. They showed the family gathered around the TV watching Bush's speech. "Hey! We're just like the Waltons!" Bart exclaims. "We're praying for an end to the Depression, too!"

Bush lost his reelection bid to Bill Clinton. And *The Simpsons* ruled. The show ripened and matured over the next several seasons as the primitive animation morphed into "slicker designs and a more varied palette," as John Ortved notes. "The writers increasingly filled the show with sly pop culture references and filmic parodies—Hitchcock and Kubrick were recurring favorites." By 2000, even the bible of conservatism had hopped aboard the *Simpsons* train. "It's possibly the most intelligent, funny, and even politically satisfying TV show ever," wrote the *National Review*. "*The Simpsons* celebrates many…of the best conservative principles: the primacy of family, skepticism about political authority…. Springfield residents…attend church every Sunday."

Among the many rock stars who have made cameos are Aerosmith (above) and Ringo Starr (opposite).

From early on, a long list of cultural figures—movie stars, athletes, musicians (including three surviving Beatles and the Rolling Stones), politicians, scientists (Stephen Hawking!), and authors—were lining up to do Simpsons voice cameos (see page 40). Arguably the show's greatest casting coup came in the mid-2000s when it snagged reclusive novelist Thomas Pynchon, known for his dense literary masterpieces but almost as much because he has only been photographed one or two times, from a distance, since the 1950s. Pynchon voiced in two episodes, one of which has him rib his own image by parading up and down the sidewalk wearing his name on a sandwich board and a paper bag over his head, like the Unknown Comic, hawking tours of his house—which features a neon sign that reads "Thomas Pynchon's House, Come On In." (Pynchon apparently refused to say one line wherein he calls Homer a "fat ass." He said: "Homer is my role model, and I won't speak ill of him.")

The Pynchon episodes highlight the show's layered humor. The writers managed to hit several audiences at once: 1) the small universe of people who have made it through *Gravity's Rainbow*; 2) a somewhat larger universe who have never read Pynchon but know he's a reclusive author; and 3) most people—who've never heard of the guy but just enjoyed the sight gag.

OVER THE DECADES, THE SIMPSONS' critical reception has ebbed and flowed—for instance, some cite a creative slump around the millennium, though others disagree. There have been more gag- and shtick-heavy periods, more Bart- or Homer-centric phases, more reliance on pop culture references and those flashy guest cameos, softer Marge and Lisa episodes. But throughout all the ups, downs, twists, and turns, Selman says, "the lifeblood of this show has always been the writing. The voice acting is amazing, the music is amazing, the animation is amazing. But it was always written first."

The original writing team, which set the template for the series, also included some who have remained with *The Simpsons* for the entire 36-year run, all of them revered figures in the annals of Simpsoniana. Among them were eventual longtime showrunner Al Jean and his writing partner Mike Reiss, Jay Kogen and his partner Wallace Wolodarsky, John Swartzwelder, George Meyer, Jon Vitti, and Jeff Martin. "And it just was a magical group of people—all the early

writers wrote amazing stuff," Groening says. "Like, just to name one of endless examples, when Jay Kogen and his partner Wolodarsky came up with the idea that Krusty the Clown [the embittered, dissipated kids' TV star] was Jewish—that gave us decades of great stories."

A long list of other distinguished alums includes writer-producer Conan O'Brien, who only stayed a year (1992–1993) but wrote what many critics consider the greatest *Simpsons* episode, "Marge vs. the Monorail."

Of course, any *Simpsons* Hall of Fame would include Matt Selman. "I think I may have the record for the writer who's worked the longest consistent, uninterrupted full-time stint on a single American comedy show," Selman says. "Although the fantastic, iconic, Mount Rushmore *Simpsons* showrunner Al Jean probably has the record for most episodes worked on in any capacity. And of course the big bosses, Jim Brooks and Matt Groening, have been there for everything. But these statistics don't mean anything to me. I care more about quality than quantity."

Or, as Groening fondly puts it, "Selman is always saying, 'I don't want to be the one who wrecks the show.'"

Just as it took a creative village to turn the *Simpsons* into a global institution, the large array of supporting characters allows for a bottomless well of plots, subplots, and running gags. "As a kid I loved *The Andy Griffith Show*, and the idea that Mayberry had a barber and a town drunk and all these other people," Groening says. "I thought, let's do that with Springfield, but you know, we were not limited to just a few actors and a few sets—we can draw whatever we want, and so there are hundreds of secondary characters, some that were written for a single joke who have stayed on the show for three decades. A huge amount of credit goes to the voice actors, because they rarely are given any direction or notes—we write this stuff for them and just see what they come up with. Dan Castellaneta, the voice of Homer and Mayor Quimby and Krusty the Clown and so many more—whatever comes out of his mouth is hilarious. And the same applies to Harry Shearer and Hank Azaria." Both have voiced countless characters—some of Shearer's most notable include Principal Skinner, Ned Flanders, and Waylon Smithers; Azaria does Moe Szyslak, Chief Wiggum, and Superintendent Chalmers. "Of course, Julie Kavner's voice is so distinctive," Groening adds, "that she can basically only play Marge or Marge's sisters [chain-smoking twins Patty and Selma]."

MATT GROENING

From early on, a long list of cultural figures—movie stars, athletes, musicians, politicians, scientists, and authors—were lining up to do voice cameos.

The process of developing a *Simpsons* episode from conception to realization takes about eight months, Selman explains. It begins in one of the writers rooms. "I guess it's like a never-ending script conference," he says. "So it's a bunch of people sitting around a table—a small and efficient writers room is between about four and six people, which is the best way to get everyone participating and get good value. I mean, it can be chaotic, but it's not the insane asylum. It's really just a bunch of smart, funny, interesting people who are passionate about collaboration.

Now, let's say someone has an inkling of an idea—for example, Bart befriends a brain in a jar ["Bart's Brain," the Season 35 finale]. So we go into the writers room and think, 'What's the emotional build of this? What are the funny things about the jar? Where did he get the brain in the jar, and what's his relationship with it like? How does the story escalate? How does it surprise? What's the character conflict like?' All the ingredients.

"Then a writer will go and write an outline based on a couple days of pitching, and we rough it out on the white board," Selman continues. "You know, kind of get an idea of what we think the best beginning, middle, and end is, generally, and still very flexible. So then that writer might outline a summary with the best jokes, making sure the story works as a cohesive whole with the emotion, surprises, reversals, all the kind of elements of storytelling that hopefully we're good at. Then maybe another writers room would be going over that more carefully, really being rigorous and making sure the story is locked in. After we do the first pass, the writers will do what we call an in-room read, where we will perform the show for ourselves. We're not hilarious like *The Simpsons* voice cast, but at least you get a sense of the pace of it. Then we'll do one more polish and go to the table read, and where our actors perform it, and Matt Groening and Jim Brooks are there. Those guys will give us their notes, we'll have our own notes, then we'll do another rewrite, and then we record it."

Throughout the process, Selman says, the team keeps in mind its audiences—essentially three of them. One, of course, is *The Simpsons*' loyal, savvy viewership. "Another audience is ourselves, the writing staff, and one thing we're always keeping in mind is that Matt and Jim have to like this. They are our North Star and North Pole—I don't know which one of them is which—and we're making sure the episode has the subversiveness and the emotional reality, the pathos that are part of the DNA of the show. *The Simpsons* is not the edgiest show in the world anymore, certainly not compared with *South Park* and *Rick and Morty* or *Family Guy*, and god knows what goes on the internet, right? So we really try to be really true to our characters and really love our characters and embrace the good but flawed nature of Springfield residents."

After hundreds and hundreds of episodes, how does *The Simpsons* avoid repeating itself, recycling an idea from 1992 or 2007? "That's a tough goal," Groening says. "I mean, *South Park* did a whole episode called 'The Simpsons Already Did It.' Fortunately, there are a few people on the show who have very long memories and remind us when we've already done something."

"To me, that's the most fun part of the job, and the most satisfying," Selman says. "Obviously, repetition is going to happen, but I really look at our stack of shows and I think every show has something original about it, something new to say, a new character conflict or a new dynamic or a new part of society that hasn't been held up yet in the *Simpsons* mirror. In our show, we're sort of blessed with the greatest artistic toy box you could ever hope for, and a universe of characters people love who are already hilarious. The hardest thing as a writer is to create characters that people care about and people think are funny, right? Well, that work was done 36 years ago, and then we've always said we're starting at like 55 miles an hour on every episode. We don't have to build up to 55.

"That's the gift we've received," Selman adds. "And our task is to deliver as much originality as we can. Like, we have a show… where Grandpa and Moe [Szyslak, Springfield's cantankerous bar owner] become friends. Like, you could see these

Current showrunner Selman (opposite) has no plans for a final episode, but the show did mock the concept of series finales in "Bart's Birthday" in 2024 (above), with Bart almost turning 11 years old.

two lonely, scuzzy guys bonding, right? And it's all about how they're convincing a Shohei Ohtani–like baseball phenom to come to Springfield, and the team becomes a big success. Then we do our parody of the Ohtani gambling scandal, so we have tons of baseball people and lots of satire about the pervasiveness of sports gambling. But there's also a satisfying emotional story between two characters who haven't had one before." (The episode, "Abe League of Their Moe," aired in April 2025.)

That emotional core is one of *The Simpsons*' defining strengths. "From the very beginning, that was Jim Brooks's original note: Make people forget they're watching a cartoon," Groening says.

"The bread and butter of it is characters you care about trying to be good people in a world that makes it so hard to be good, where institutions are not your friend," adds Selman. "That's what I kind of like about this show—like, everyone in America hates everyone else now, and it's depressing. But in Springfield, they may be dumb and easily misled and self-destructive and shortsighted the way America is; they're flawed and troubled and sometimes they do bad things. But no one is a bad, evil person—except for Mr. Burns, and even he has his traumas that made him the way he is."

The Simpsons opened up Season 36 with an episode—"Bart's Birthday"—that was billed as the "series finale." It was actually a spoof of finales, but has the series' brain trust ever considered what a real final episode might look like?

No way, man!

"Journalists ask that, and I'm like, 'It's not *supposed* to end,'" Selman says. As he notes, the show doesn't have a 36-year story arc that can be tied up in a grand finale. "Every episode is its own little movie, with its own beginning, middle, and ending."

"I assume that at some point we'll stop making them—but I really do love keeping the show going," Groening says. "I just like that it's not a ghost ship—I mean, there's so many great series, like *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm,* and *The Sopranos,* and there's kind of a sadness that there will never be new ones. So it's fun that our show is still alive!" ◻

THE MOST SATISFYING SHOW ON TELEVISION

When the series reached its 100th episode in 1994, a TIME critic paid tribute to its humor, wit, and charm.

BY RICHARD CORLISS

HERE ARE 10 REASONS THE Simpsons are America's ideal family:

1. They stick together through thin and thin.
Father Homer, mother Marge, 10-year-old Bart, 8-year-old Lisa, and baby Maggie seem to be a typical sitcom family—*The Honeymooners* with kids, *The Flintstones* in suburbia—with typically outlandish dilemmas to face and resolve each week. But the similarity ends there. Since it sprang in 1989 from cartoon spots on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, *The Simpsons* has proved uniquely dense and witty. And thanks to top writers, directors, and actors in the care of creator Matt Groening and comedy veteran Jim Brooks, it has stayed that way. As it celebrates its

100th episode—"That's 800 episodes in sitcom years," says Groening of the six-month production time for each show—*The Simpsons* can celebrate more: its status as TV's most satisfying program.

2. For a family of underachievers, the Simpsons have achieved quite a bit. Homer has been a monorail conductor and a baseball mascot; he won a Grammy (for outstanding soul, spoken word, or barbershop album) and survived eating a deadly blowfish. Marge sang Blanche Dubois in the musical *O Streetcar!* Lisa created her own talking doll, mastered the saxophone and the Talmud, was a Junior Miss Springfield, uncovered political corruption, and saved the republic. Bart adopted an elephant, fell down a well and was rescued by Sting, and was tried for murdering Principal Skinner. Maggie had her first word voiced for her by Elizabeth Taylor.

3. There is life beyond Bart. The scamp was the show's first star; his ripostes ("Eat my shorts") became T-shirt slogans. Bart is still the richest *Simpsons* character, but the purview has expanded to include all of Springfield, with 50 or so comic figures, from the Kwik-E-Mart's Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and the Kennedy-esque Mayor Quimby to Krusty the Clown and his sadistic cartoon cohorts Itchy & Scratchy—a wonderfully congested cosmos each week.

4. Homer isn't bright, but he loves his brood. The poor patriarch is so dull-witted that he probably couldn't count to 16 if he used all his fingers and his toes. But he is a faithful husband, and if he often derides his kids, he will do anything—go skateboarding off a cliff, defy his boss, buy Lisa a pony—if they scream loud enough and if Marge gives him a lecture.

5. They have famous friends. Guest voices on the show have included Bob Hope, Michelle Pfeiffer, Ringo Starr, Johnny Carson, Darryl Strawberry, Aerosmith, Bette Midler, Michael Jackson, and Dustin Hoffman. "For some reason," says Groening, "a lot of Hollywood big shots are curious to see how they'd be drawn with bulging eyes and no chin."

6. They are excellent role models. True story: A few years ago, a 10-year- old successfully performed the Heimlich maneuver on his choking brother after seeing it illustrated on *The Simpsons*.

7. They're smart. Well, their writers are, anyway. "There are jokes you won't get unless you've actually attended a few college classes," says Groening. Lit. 101 will teach you that Lisa's poetry is inspired by Allen Ginsberg's, and that the prison number (24601) worn variously by Marge, Principal Skinner, and Sideshow Bob is Jean Valjean's in *Les Miserables*. It also helps if you know old movies: *Simpsons* plots have plundered *King Kong*, *Citizen Kane*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Cape Fear,* and the entire Hitchcock oeuvre. "If you steal from a black-and-white film," Brooks told the writers, "it's an homage."

8. They're reliable. "Animated characters don't get busted," says Groening, "and they don't get old." Maggie has not aged a day. Homer can't get much fatter or balder. Marge's bouffant will always look like a neatly trimmed blue fir. Bart frets about graduating from fourth grade, but fate and good ratings will keep him there for life. Lisa, the poor stranded sensitive intellectual, will never escape Springfield.

9. After all these years, they can still surprise you. Part of the fun of watching is trying to figure out what the main plot line will be; the first few minutes of any episode are so packed with comic detail that the story could go in any of a dozen directions. This is one show whose writers seem to have too many good ideas.

10. They have heart. One of Brooks' cardinal rules: Let's not be afraid of emotion. The strongest episodes are those (such as "Lisa's Substitute," "Homer Alone," "Like Father, Like Clown," and "Bart the Lover") that reveal the bedrock fondness, desperation, and loyalty that bond this and any other frazzled clan. A viewer can feel awe at the show's cascading wit and still purr at the sweet, deep sentiment. Hail, *Simpsons*!

In the 2012 episode "Lisa Goes Gaga," pop star Lady Gaga visits Springfield to help cheer up Lisa, whose popularity has plummeted.

MATT GROENING

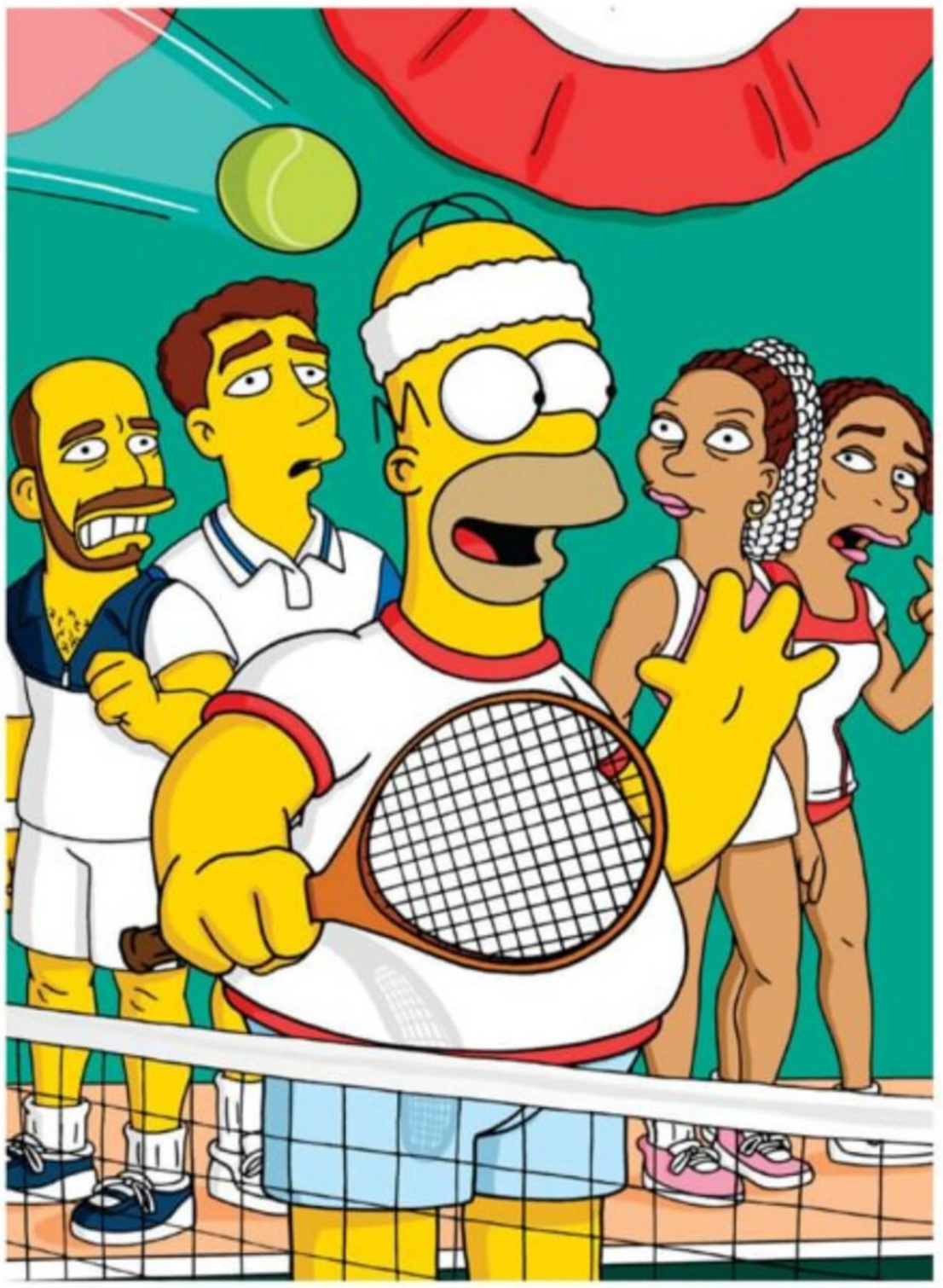
Guests of Honor

The show has a long history of high-profile actors, musicians, athletes, and other public figures popping into Springfield.

BY KEITH MURPHY

IT WAS 1991, AND MATT GROENING, THE visionary behind *The Simpsons,* was in his office when he received an unlikely phone call. "Hello. Hi, this is Michael Jackson,'" said a soft voice. Groening instantly dismissed it as a prank call. "And [he] calls back, 'No, it really is, don't hang up,'" Groening recalled during a 2018 appearance on the Australian news satire show *The Weekly.* "Because he has a voice like someone doing a Michael Jackson bit. And he said that he loved Bart and wanted to be on the show."

At the time, Jackson was at the height of his King of Pop powers, before the 1993 allegations of child sexual abuse, a subsequent settlement, and his 2005 trial acquittal. Groening was no fool. He took Jackson up on his request. But when the singer appeared in the classic Season 3 episode "Stark Raving Dad," it wasn't as himself but as Leon Kompowsky, a hulking yet sweet asylum patient who thinks he's Michael Jackson and befriends Homer.



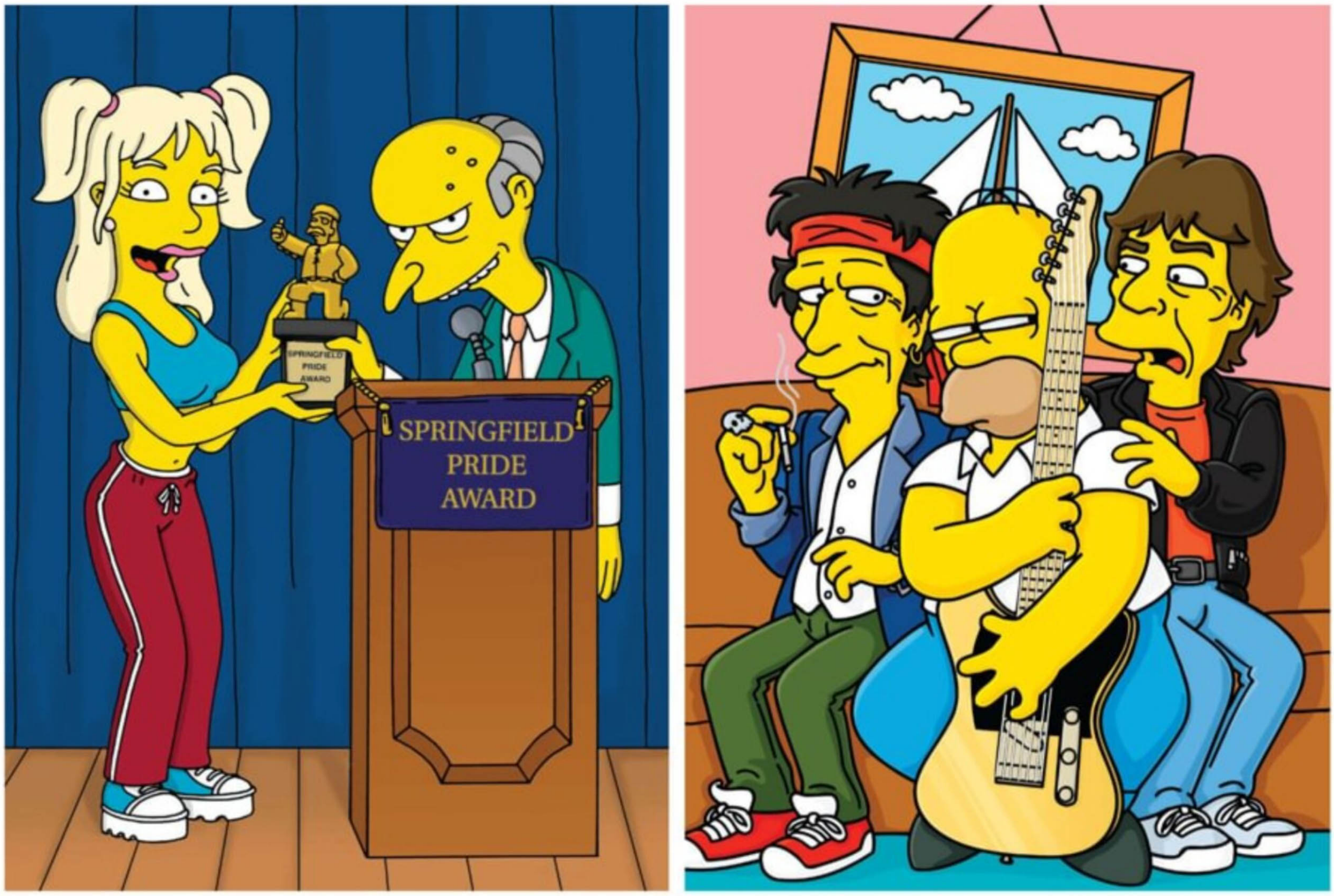
Not only did legal issues prevent the show from using Jackson's likeness, vocals, and name (he was credited as John Jay Smith, according to Groening, due to "some kind of deal with his record company"), but a voice impersonator was brought in to sing the memorable MJ-penned song "Lisa It's Your Birthday." Yet the episode proved to be a critical and commercial hit, officially solidifying the adult animated series *The Simpsons* as the coolest celebrity gig on prime time television (though, due to scandals revolving around the late Jackson, it remains the only episode in the series' catalog that is not available on steaming or in syndication).

If the seemingly indomitable *Law & Order* franchise is the go-to launching pad for up-and-coming actors looking for their big break, *The Simpsons*, America's longest-running scripted series, is the ultimate co-sign for pop culture immortality.

Since the show's debut, the fictional town of Springfield has welcomed over 1,000 guest stars. The wildly diverse list includes Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, James Earl Jones, Danny DeVito, Stephen Hawking, Kathleen Turner, Johnny Carson, 50 Cent, British prime minister Tony Blair, Halle Berry, the Ramones, Leonard Nimoy, Yo-Yo Ma, Britney Spears, and LeBron James.

Springfield has welcomed over 1,000 guest stars, including Meryl Streep, James Earl Jones, Danny DeVito, Halle Berry, Yo-Yo Ma, and LeBron James.

Three Beatles (Ringo Starr, George Harrison, and Paul McCartney) and two Rolling Stones (Mick Jagger and Keith Richards) have appeared as themselves on the show. So have legendary astronaut Buzz Aldrin, Golden Age Hollywood



Among those who have appeared on the show (from left): Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny of The X-Files; *tennis stars Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Venus Williams, and Serena Williams; Britney Spears; and Keith Richards and Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones.*

funnyman Bob Hope, and influencer and cosmetics maven Kylie Jenner.

Oscar winner Dustin Hoffman had a memorable turn as empathetic educator Mr. Bergstrom ("Lisa's Substitute"), who consoles our favorite 8-year-old intellectual as she begs him not to leave Springfield for a teaching job in the projects of Capitol City. "That's the problem with being middle class," he tells a teary-eyed Lisa. "Anybody who really cares will abandon you for those who need it more."

Roseanne actress Sara Gilbert nailed it as army-jacket-wearing badass girl-next-door Laura Powers, who breaks Bart's lovesick heart ("New Kid on the Block") before letting him down gently, admitting, "You know, if you were only old enough to grow a bad teenaged mustache, I'd go out with you in a second."

And famed country music rebel Johnny Cash showcased surprising comedic range as a mystical coyote—props to whoever on *The Simpsons* team convinced the Man in Black to growl!—who leads Homer on a hallucinogenic Guatemalan peppers–induced quest to find his true soulmate ("El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Homer"). Spoiler alert: It was his superhumanly patient wife Marge all along.

The award for the most out-of-the-box casting, however, goes to Elizabeth Taylor. In the 1992 episode "Lisa's First Word," the revered screen star voiced the first utterance by baby Maggie: "Daddy." Executive producer Al Jean fondly remembered the recording session with the "Most Beautiful Woman in the World" in a 2011 interview with *Entertain-*

ment Weekly. "I asked [Taylor] for a lot of takes because it's very hard to know what you want on one word, but she was really funny about it," he recalled. "After I said, 'OK, we got it!' she said, 'F— you!' in the Maggie voice. She was kidding. Everybody laughed."

It's not hard to comprehend why *The Simpsons* became the preeminent bucket-list destination for the stars. A ratings smash out the gate, by its third season the series had moved to more ambitious guest storylines.

When *The Simpsons* unveiled its acclaimed 1992 episode "Homer at the Bat"—which featured the voices of nine Major League Baseball greats, including Ken Griffey Jr., Ozzie Smith and José Canseco—it was the first time the series beat an original installment of NBC powerhouse *The Cosby Show* in the Nielsens. Fox was now a serious player in the ratings race.

Yet the origins of the show's celebrity voice pipeline began not with an A-list superstar, but with a TV sitcom vet. Marcia Wallace had initially risen to fame as wisecracking receptionist Carol Kester on the classic 1970s comedy *The Bob Newhart Show*. She would make her *Simpsons* debut in the second episode of the first season as Bart's hilariously jaded, sexually frustrated, chain-smoking fourth grade teacher, Edna Krabappel.

What started as a bit part eventually blossomed into one of show's most beloved reoccurring characters. Wallace won a Primetime Emmy Award in 1992 for outstanding voice-over performance for her moving work in the poignant "Bart the Lover." In the episode, Edna's most mischievous student pulls an elaborate prank, creating a phony romantic pen pal named "Woodrow" for a lonely Ms. Krabappel.

Things get serious when the "date" stands her up at a restaurant, as Bart looks on with heartbreaking regret. "Bart, you're the closest thing to a man in my life," Edna admits to him. "And that's so depressing, I think I'm going to cry."

Wallace, who died in 2013, joins Albert Brooks (Brad Goodman, Hank Scorpio, Cowboy Bob), Phil Hartman (Lionel Hutz, Troy McClure), and Kelsey Grammer (Sideshow Bob) on the Mount Rushmore of guest voices in the long history of *The Simpsons*.

As it did with Hartman's characters, the show retired Ms. Krabappel after the actress's death. During the opening credits of the posthumous episode "Four Regrettings and a Funeral," the show paid tribute to Wallace as Bart wrote "WE'LL REALLY MISS YOU MRS. K." on the chalkboard

Opposite: Drag Race *host RuPaul guest-starred as a drag perfomer in 2018; Kerry Washington has played teacher Rayshelle Peyton in several episodes. Above: A parade of TV chefs, including Mario Batali, Anthony Bourdain, and Gordon Ramsay, appeared in a 2011 episode.*

during the opening title sequence.

In more recent years, standout celebrity performances have included rapper/singer Lizzo, who embraced the absurdity of being the sobering voice of toy elf Goobie-Woo guiding a supposedly dead Homer during a visit to hell (2023's 750th episode,"Homer's Adventures Through the Windshield Glass"). And the show hit a casting home run with *Scandal* star Kerry Washington as Springfield Elementary School's newest teacher, Rayshelle Peyton, the kindhearted, dedicated successor to Ms. Krabappel.

Bar-setting performances such as Grammer as Robert Terwilliger, aka Sideshow Bob (Krusty the Clown's disgruntled former sidekick turned Bart Simpson's hapless, bloodthirsty archnemesis), have been hard acts to follow. Watching the *Frasier* star totally immerse himself as the perpetually rake-stepping, foil-channeling Robert Mitchum and Robert De Niro in the brilliant *Cape Fear* parody "Cape Feare" is comedic bliss.

Lawyer: "What about that tattoo on your chest? Doesn't it say, 'Die, Bart, Die'?"

Sideshow Bob: "No. That's German for 'Vie, Bart, vie.'"

Talk about big clown shoes to fill. ◻

MATT GROENING

COUCH GAGS

Over the years, the show's opening sequences have become increasingly elaborate and a creative showcase for guest artists.

BY MARISA ROFFMAN

***THE SIMPSONS'* OPENING TITLE** sequence—which traditionally starts with Bart, in detention, writing a different phrase on the chalkboard each week, then skating through town before coming home as the family gathers in unusual ways on the couch to watch television—is one of the signature elements of the long-running series. But its genesis was more practical than creative.

"I thought, 'Hey, we'll do a long main title. We [will] have to do less animation [in the episode],'" *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening revealed on the DVD commentary for "Bart the Genius," the second episode of the series (and the first to feature the opening sequence). To keep it from feeling stale, he said, "We'[d] toss the fans a bone by putting in extra jokes with the couch gag and [Bart writing different messages on] the blackboard."

Initially, the couch gag was confined to the couch or living room, with antics like Homer being squeezed off the furniture by the rest of the family, the couch falling backward, and a circus line breaking out. But as the show's episode count (and success) grew, the team took bigger swings.

The gags have paid tribute to pop culture hits in the zeitgeist such as prestige series *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*, as well as fellow animated shows like *Futurama*, *Adventure Time,* and *Rick and Morty*.

Producers have also recruited famous guest animators to do their take, including Sylvain Chomet, Don Hertzfeldt, Steve Cutts, Michal Socha, Eric Goldberg, and *Ren & Stimpy Show* creator John Kricfalusi. Oscar-nominated animator Bill Plympton has done over half a dozen couch gags, starting with Season 23.

The show even poked fun at itself with a 2010 couch gag created by enigmatic British street artist Banksy that implied the series' animation and merchandise were crafted in an Asian sweatshop, complete with unicorn horns being used to craft DVDs. "Certainly, Fox has been very gracious about us biting the hand that feeds us, but I showed it to Matt Groening, and he said no, we should go for it and try to do it pretty much as close as we [could] to the original intention," executive producer and former showrunner Al Jean told the *New York Times* in 2010. "So we did."

On the lighter side, holidays have allowed the series to put a festive spin on things, with Christmas installments featuring the family in winter gear, singing holiday songs, and paying homage to classics like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *A Christmas Carol*. The "Treehouse of Horror" Halloween episodes started off with more minor hat tips (zombies, skeletons, an appearance by the Grim Reaper) before expanding to more elaborate sequences.

One of the biggest couch gags was the nearly three-minute "Treehouse of Horror XXIV" opening by Guillermo Del Toro, which nods to the director's *Pan's Labyrinth* as well as Alfred Hitchcock, Stephen King, *Futurama*, *Blade,* and dozens of other horror properties and tropes. "*The Simpsons* titles are so iconic, and yet they've never been riffed in this vein," Del Toro told *Entertainment Weekly* in 2013. "I really wanted to land the connections between the [show's] set pieces and the titles and some of the most iconic horror movies, and intersperse them with some of my stuff in there for pure joy."

The series has also utilized fan work they've discovered over the years. "I feel like it's really important to embrace people who love the show and love to reinterpret it in their own personal style," showrunner Matt Selman told *GQ* in 2022. "We had a young gentleman who lives in Venezuela, and [we used] his designs of the teenage version of *The Simpsons* for a couch gag on an episode. And I think it connects us to a new generation of *Simpsons* fans in a really special way."

The gags have become known for their creativity, but a level of practicality remains. Though the opening sequence doesn't appear in every episode, "usually the couch gags and chalkboards are not connected to the writing process of storytelling," Selman told *GQ*. Instead, the team considers multiple options, pairing potential couch gags with the corresponding run time of the episode. "So if you have writers who aren't busy on any given day, we'll try to think of funny ideas for the season ahead of time and put those into a parallel production process." An approach as timeless as the show itself.

CHAPTER

2

BEST. CARTOON. EVER.

The Simpsons has produced a trove of celebrated episodes, created a wickedly funny Halloween franchise, and triumphantly jumped to the big screen.

MATT GROENING

10 Most Memorable Episodes

In 2019—30 years and nearly 700 episodes into the show's run—three *Simpsons* experts weighed in on the classic installments.

BY RAISA BRUNER

WHEN *THE SIMPSONS* CELEBRATED ITS 30th anniversary in December 2019, TIME spoke to three scholars and experts who have written extensively about the show over the years, particularly about its lauded first decade. Journalist John Ortved, who wrote *The Simpsons: An Uncensored, Unauthorized History,* considers it one of the most powerful cultural forces in television. "I'd put *The Simpsons* right up there—I think it's as or more powerful than *Saturday Night Live*," he told TIME. Chris Turner, another journalist and author of *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation*, agrees. For Ray Richmond, critic and co-author of *The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family*, it's one of the classics.

And when the show doesn't hit the subversive highs of its early years, it still claims respect. "Even at its lowest, it's been greater than almost every comedy," Richmond says. The trick is that it took a traditional family sitcom and added the cartoon twist. "At its core, it's just a feel-good show about this wonderful family. It's a combination of character development, great guest stars, sight gags, and homages to the past and to films," he explains of its long-standing appeal. As for its future? "It will never go out."

Here are 10 of the most memorable episodes of *The Simpsons* according to those who have studied the iconic show over its run, focusing primarily on its acclaimed first 15 years.

10

“Rosebud”

SEASON 5, EPISODE 4 (1993)

This *Citizen Kane* homage gets into the backstory of Mr. Burns, recalling his beloved childhood teddy bear, Bobo, which he discarded in exchange for ascension to a life of wealth, and his lifelong quest to recover the treasured object. “It’s as perfect an episode of television as I’ve ever seen,” Ortved says. There are extensive historical references as Bobo’s journey is traced from Mr. Burns through the hands of Adolf Hitler and an expedition to the North Pole before miraculously ending up in the arms of Homer’s daughter Maggie—leading, of course, to a Homer versus Mr. Burns showdown. To top it off, there’s voice acting from the rock band the Ramones (left), adding an official layer of punk-rock cool. “On some level, *The Simpsons* is a kind of punk-rock TV show, or certainly was,” Ortved says. That irreverence has only enabled its long life.

"Cape Feare"

SEASON 5, EPISODE 2 (1993)

This is what Richmond calls the "ultimate Sideshow Bob episode." It's primarily a play on the Oscar-nominated 1991 movie *Cape Fear*, a psychological thriller from Martin Scorsese. In the *Simpsons* version, Homer and his family are terrorized by Bart's nemesis Sideshow Bob, voiced by actor Kelsey Grammer; they end up entering the witness protection program and relocating to a new town and a houseboat to try to escape. But despite the dire context, they're able to mine plenty of comedy out of the circumstances. One of the most memorable parts of the episode is a comic bit that's become *Simpsons* legend: Sideshow Bob keeps stepping onto rakes that continually whack him in the face. "It was one of those things where they were almost testing the theory that anything repeated enough becomes funny," Turner says. "It becomes kind of repetitive and tedious, but by the seventh or eighth time it's *funny*. It's a comedic exercise." And it worked.

MATT GROENING

8

"Homer's Enemy"

SEASON 8, EPISODE 23 (1997)

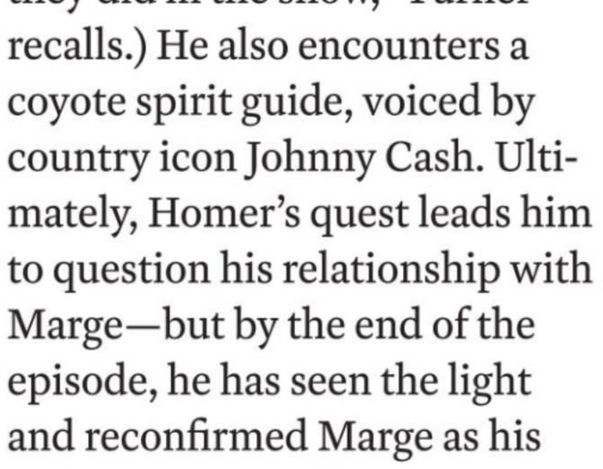
This episode explores what happens when reality—or something like it—bumps up against the *Simpsons* fantasy. Mr. Burns hires a hardworking man named Frank Grimes to join the power plant. But when Grimes is stuck with Homer, he is driven to madness and, ultimately, death. "It's quite dark," admits Ortved, "but you and I laugh so hard, because you realize everyone in the Simpsons world has become so inured to Homer's stupidity, gluttony, and downright parasitic laziness. And you realize that these people have become not only OK with it but charmed by it—and so have you." Ortved calls this the "Hannah Arendt episode" for its wry portrayal of the "banality of evil"—a timeless term originally coined by the German-American theorist following the Holocaust. "Homer's Enemy" also has its share of critics who see it as a bit too on the nose in its unusually clear-eyed depiction of Homer's faults, making it one of the show's more controversial episodes.

7

“El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer (The Mysterious Voyage of Homer)”

SEASON 8, EPISODE 9 (1997)

In a foray into a newly surrealist realm—or a “spirit quest acid trip,” as Turner describes it—Homer wins a hot-pepper-eating contest only to start hallucinating due to the strength of the peppers. While on his metaphysical journey, strange things happen; he shatters the sun, for instance. (“It’s one of the few old-school cartoon things they did in the show,” Turner recalls.) He also encounters a coyote spirit guide, voiced by country icon Johnny Cash. Ultimately, Homer’s quest leads him to question his relationship with Marge—but by the end of the episode, he has seen the light and reconfirmed Marge as his soulmate, a touching moment of romance in a show not always known for its sensitivity to love. The unusual visuals in the animations make it particularly memorable in the show’s run.



“Deep Space Homer”

SEASON 5, EPISODE 15 (1994)

In this take on *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Homer heads to the cosmos after being selected as an average-Joe astronaut to give NASA better ratings. In typical Homer fashion, he manages to mess up the navigational instruments with a smuggled bag of chips and unleashes an ant farm on the shuttle, which the folks back on earth erroneously end up believing are giant alien ants. Predictably, mayhem and near-death mishaps ensue, although Homer gets home safely. Memorably, astronaut Buzz Aldrin and musician James Taylor make voice cameos. And as for the jokes? “It’s still got some of my favorite single lines in the show,” Turner says. Richmond concurs that he’s still got a soft spot for this episode.

MATT GROENING

5

“Homer at the Bat”

SEASON 3, EPISODE 17 (1992)

In order to win a softball game, Mr. Burns hires Major League Baseball stars to staff up the company’s team. Notably, the *Simpsons* creative team managed to get the players themselves, including Roger Clemens, Wade Boggs, and Ken Griffey Jr., to voice-act their characters. “It’s amazing in retrospect that they managed to get these celebrity athletes,” says Turner. “But the episode isn’t in thrall to whoever it is. It’s really held up.” Thanks to the nine players who contributed, it’s an iconic episode that showcases the power of *The Simpsons*’ allure to draw in unusual cameos.

4

"The President Wore Pearls"

SEASON 15, EPISODE 3 (2003)

Clever, precocious Lisa becomes student body president at her elementary school in this episode that parodies the musical *Evita*, with Lisa even singing a spin on "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" as she goes on to rule the school. "It's a really careful and smart satire and tribute to a musical, a great exploration of Lisa," Ortved says, "and it gets into a character's weakness and darker sides—and her hunger for power." Beyond that, the episode is full of small jokes and gags that keep it memorable, including a cameo by filmmaker Michael Moore as himself. "It's highly watchable, the songs are good, the pacing is great, and it has these wonderful moments that explore the tension between kids and adults," Ortved says. For instance, there's a point at which Lisa, as president, has access to the teacher's lounge. Awed by her power, the other students suggest the teachers must make fun of the kids in their private chamber. And sure enough, when Lisa peeks in on the teachers, she discovers Willie the groundskeeper making fun of the students—a cutting commentary on the cruelty of adults, as explored by a child. "There's no single episode after that that holds up as well," Ortved says.

3

"Treehouse of Horror V"

SEASON 6, EPISODE 6 (1994)

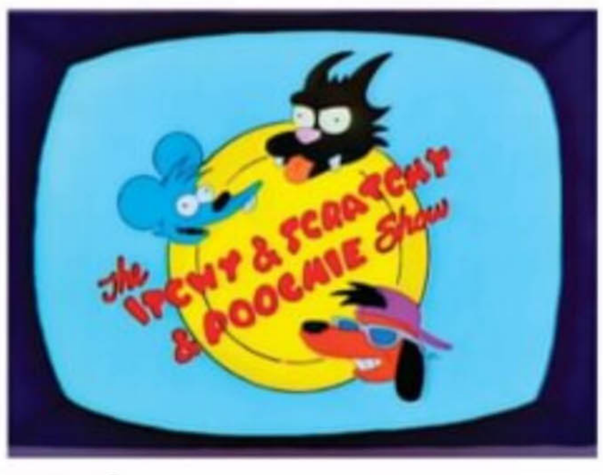
In their fifth installment of the annual Halloween-themed "Treehouse of Horror" episode, the *Simpsons* creators parodied a number of famous scary stories to sharp comic effect. "The Shinning," the segment that's most well remembered, sees the family get hired by Mr. Burns to take care of his mansion. Homer quickly deteriorates under the circumstances—to murderous effect. Richmond says the Halloween episodes are "always a great highlight," but this one stands out for the specificity of its homages—and the quality of the animation, for which *The Simpsons* doesn't always get a lot of credit but which had improved by the time this episode came around. Turner agrees, calling the 3D animation a "huge deal at the time." Besides this play on *The Shining*, there's also an homage to the musical *Sweeney Todd* involving students in the school cafeteria that delights in the macabre.

2

“The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show”

SEASON 8, EPISODE 14 (1997)

In this self-skewering episode, a popular kids’ show in the *Simpsons* universe—*The Itchy & Scratchy Show*—decides to attempt to inject fresh energy into its world with the addition of a new character, Poochie, to keep the attention of the audience. The show was not afraid to take a mirror to itself, with this episode as proof. “*The Simpsons* has always been good about tracing their own line, and commenting on their own success and their own failures,” Ortved notes. “The fact is, you can’t be that funny for that long, and comedy moves on. It’s a brilliant comment and takedown of popular television. It’s both prescient and really critical.” Turner agrees: “It’s a satire of the show itself in a lot of ways. The discussion that leads to the invention of Poochie has to be the most cited criticism of bad TV writing.” At the end of the episode, the character of Poochie is summarily dispatched—a cautionary tale about how quick fixes to grab more eyeballs are not a true solution for waning attention in the entertainment industry.



MATT GROENING

1

“Marge vs. the Monorail”

SEASON 4, EPISODE 12 (1993)

In one of the show’s finest homages to classic theater, a traveling salesman named Lyle Lanley, voiced memorably by the late Phil Hartman, comes to Springfield and sells the town on the concept of a monorail, à la *The Music Man*. The townspeople are quick to fall for his song-and-dance routine, and naturally, Homer ends up as the conductor of the faulty—and highly unnecessary—new form of transportation. Written by Conan O’Brien, it’s a fast-paced, joke-filled episode that turns *The Simpsons* from a quirky sitcom into a surreal social critique. “The voice of reason is completely thrown out the window for something quite funny and fun and imaginative,” explains Ortved, identifying the reason this episode stands out: “*The Simpsons* have always kept this kind of Aristotelian unity; they only did stuff that could happen in the real world, despite the fact they were a cartoon. And then all the sudden, you have this whole thing that explores the imaginative possibilities of animation and the elasticity of the characters. The writers had to make their reaction to something this big make sense, which is a tribute to them.” From the musical numbers to a cameo by the legendary Leonard Nimoy (who plays himself) to the comic spin on dangerous group psychology, this is an eminently thoughtful episode that has stood up over time.

AN INSIDER'S VIEW

The current *Simpsons* showrunner picks five of his personal favorite episodes from recent seasons.

BY RICH SANDS

WHEN PICKING THE BEST EPISODES of *The Simpsons*, there can be a bias toward the early seasons. But the show has continued to produce stellar installments in recent years. Matt Selman, the current showrunner, offers his take on five favorites.

"Halloween of Horror" (Season 27) After years of "Treehouse of Horror" farces, the show took a more grounded look at the holiday, with Homer showing unusual compassion in helping Lisa work through her fears.

"A Serious Flanders" (Season 33) This two-parter parodies gritty TV series, inspired by Selman's pandemic binge of the FX crime drama *Fargo*. Ned Flanders stumbles upon a bag of cash and donates it to an orphanage, only to wind up in the crosshairs of a ruthless debt collector. "It was so fun to play with those clichés of prestige dramas and use their storytelling tropes and exaggerate and Simpsonify them," Selman says. "That was a big flex for us."

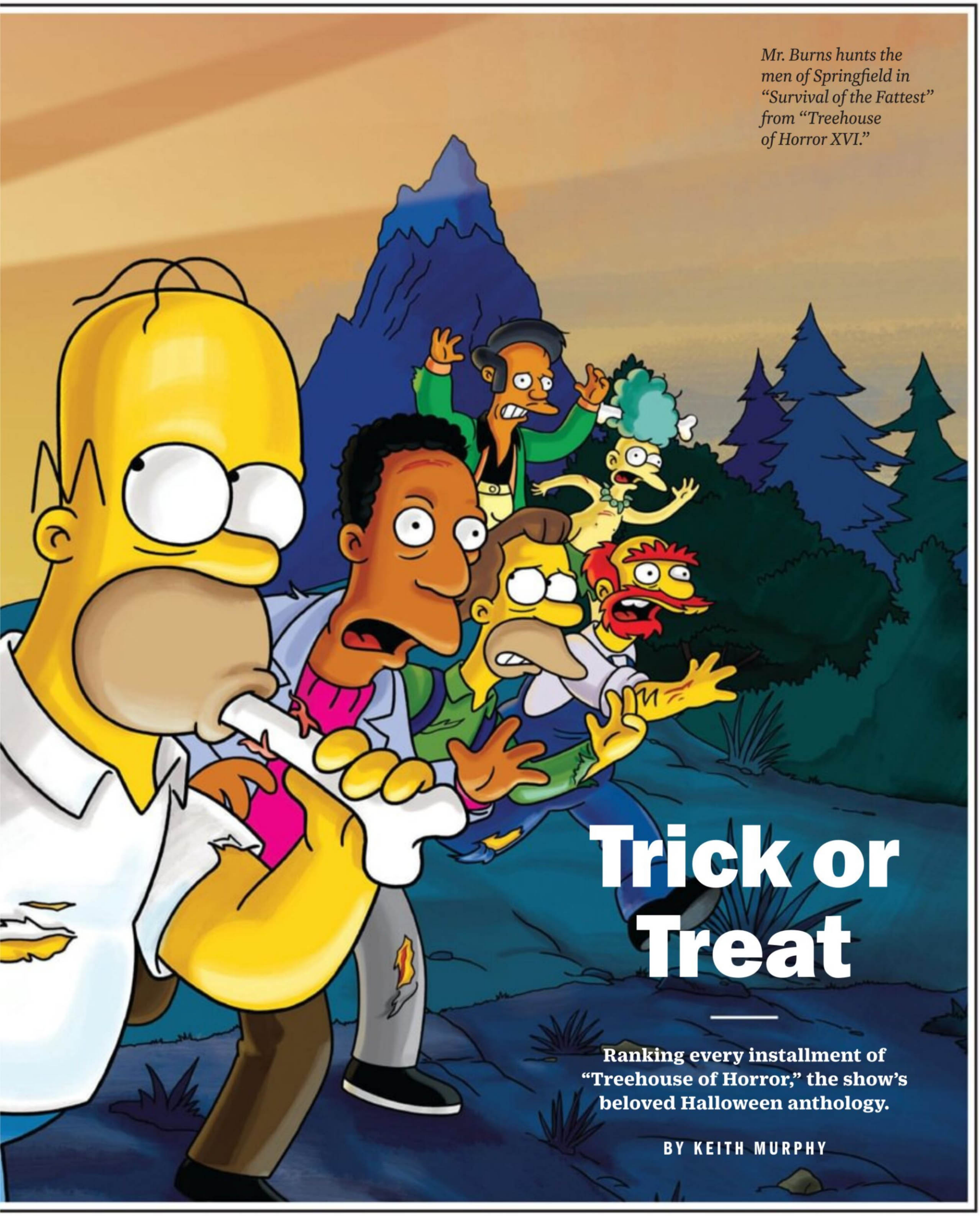
"CLAN OF THE CAVE MOM"

"A SERIOUS FLANDERS"

"Clan of the Cave Mom" (Season 35) As Marge battles with Milhouse's mom over Bart's bad behavior, a separate narrative plays out with a prehistoric version of *The Simpsons* (in the style of the animated series *Primal*) in which Marge goes to extremes to protect her brood. "It's a different kind of visceral, dynamic, violent storytelling," Selman says, "cutting back and forth and making the point that the same parenting muscles and emotions that we have today are evolutionarily almost identical to the ones that were used to keep the fire lit and the kids safe from the tigers."

"Cremains of the Day" (Season 35) When barfly Larry unexpectedly dies, Homer, Moe, Carl, and Lenny must face fears of their own mortality—all while getting caught up in a plot right out of what Selman calls "a midlife-crisis male road-trip movie from the '80s."

"Bart's Birthday" (Season 36) Viewers were shocked when this episode claimed to be the series finale of *The Simpsons,* revisiting moments from the show's previous 35 years. But it was just a tale generated by a (fictional) A.I., spoofing other shows' last episodes while imagining change in the lives of Springfield's residents. Bart realizes something is wrong and triggers Homer into a violent outburst that resets the timeline. Says Selman, "This episode was trying to honor both the classic and the new, and also say that we have a drive to be original and tell new stories and add new depths to these characters."


Trick or Treat
Ranking every installment of "Treehouse of Horror," the show's beloved Halloween anthology.
BY KEITH MURPHY
MATT GROENING

Mr. Burns hunts the men of Springfield in "Survival of the Fattest" from "Treehouse of Horror XVI."

SEASON 12

SEASON 14

SEASON 31

THE *SIMPSONS*' CELEBRATED "TREEhouse of Horror" annual special came perilously close to never happening. It was 1990, and the hit animated sitcom was preparing for its second season. That's when series creator Matt Groening pitched a throwback Halloween storyline. Not everyone was on board.

"[Groening] had an idea for an episode where [Bart and Lisa] tell ghost stories in a tree house," *Simpsons* writer Jay Kogen told *MEL* magazine in 2020. "It wasn't met with much excitement, but my partner Wally [Wolodarsky] and I championed it over and over until Sam Simon, the showrunner, finally agreed."

Good call. Since its October 25, 1990, premiere, *The Simpsons* Halloween special, which by 2002 would be known by its more familiar "Treehouse of Horror" title, has evolved into a must-see cultural staple. Inspired by *Tales from the Crypt* publisher EC Comics, the anthology-style series has seen the characters survive, kill, and die in original madcap Halloween tales and horror, sci-fi, suspense, superhero, and book parodies.

With its trademark "terrifying" name credits ("Bat" Groening, James "Hell" Brooks, etc.), mocking tombstone epitaphs and darkly themed couch gags, the long-running and at times controversial special remains a spooky institution. Turn off the lights and lock the doors: We present to you every "Treehouse" episode, ranked.

35. "Treehouse of Horror XXII"

(SEASON 23)

Fart jokes. That pretty much sums up the *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* spoof "The Diving Bell and the Butterball," in which a paralyzed Homer can only communicate through letting it rip. The rest, including a blasé take on *Avatar* ("In the Na'vi"), are just as forgettable.

34. "Treehouse of Horror XXXII"

(SEASON 33)

The *Simpsons* producers shook things up with an elongated five-segment episode that's mostly filler.

Fortunately, "Poetic Interlude" delivers the goods, paying homage to Edward Gorey's stylishly macabre animation, complete with a creepy Vincent Price–style narration by voice actor Maurice LaMarche.

33. "Treehouse of Horror XXVI"

(SEASON 27)

Three mid-level stories aside, what makes this special a letdown is its intriguing opener. What happens when Sideshow Bob finally kills Bart? Not much. With no purpose in life, the redhead menace resurrects Bart, murdering him over and over. Be careful what you wish for.

32. "Treehouse of Horror XI"

(SEASON 12)

In this installment, Homer becomes a specter ("G-G-Ghost D-D-Dad"), the family gets the fairy-tale treatment ("Scary Tales Can Come True"), and the fins take over ("Night of the Dolphin"). This is one of the rare instances when the intro, a rollicking *Munsters* tribute, outpaces the main course.

31. "Treehouse of Horror XV"

(SEASON 16)

Flanders gains the ability to foresee death in "The Ned Zone." But the strongest of the three parts is a *Fantastic Voyage* nod in which a shrunken Maggie finds herself in the body of Mr. Burns, who deadpans, "While you're in there, grab as much cancer as you can."

30. "Treehouse of Horror XIII"

(SEASON 14)

Homer turns himself into increasingly dim-witted copies to do chores in "Send in the Clones," leading to a doughnut-obsessed army that threatens to overrun the world. It's predictable. The sidesplitting "The Island of Dr. Hibbert," however, embraces the madness of its H.G. Wells source material as Marge is transformed into a blue cat hybrid consumed with jumping Homer's bones and eating birds.

29. "Treehouse of Horror XXX"

(SEASON 31)

The series' 666th episode kicks off with a witty *Omen* parody (baby Maggie carries the mark of the beast: Disney). The franchise's first *Stranger Things* spoof does an admirable job of lampooning the creepy Upside Down dimension. The '80s jokes kill, and there's a sequence involving the chalk outline of Milhouse that's sure to induce howls, overshadowing the *Heaven Can Wait* and *Shape of Water* parodies.

28. "Treehouse of Horror XIV"

(SEASON 15)

Homer kills the Grim Reaper ("Reaper Madness"), creating a world without death. It's funny until the jokes grow stagnant when Homer takes over the Reaper's job, indiscriminately killing fans at a baseball game just so he and Bart can get better seats. And Hank Azaria's Professor Frink ("Frinkenstein") outzanies guest voice OG Nutty Professor Jerry Lewis.

27. "Treehouse of Horror XXXIV"

(SEASON 35)

While amusing in spots, "Wild Barts Can't Be Token" has aged poorly due to its dated NFT storyline. Thankfully, the *Se7en* meets *Silence of the Lambs* bloody jaunt "Ei8ht" shines. Lisa stands in for Clarice Starling and Nelson is inept, but honest cop Kelsey Grammer eats up as Hannibal Lecter–ish Side Show Bob, elevating this edition.

26. "Treehouse of Horror XXIX"

(SEASON 30)

The "Invasion of the Pod-y Switchers" Apple send-up (RIP Steve Mobbs) still has some bite. But things really get cooking when Yeardley Smith (Lisa) flexes her impressive voice arsenal ("Multiplisa-ty") in a delightful *Split* squib. And the Grandpa-centered "Geriatric Park" is as hysterical as it sounds.

25. "Treehouse of Horror XXIII"

(SEASON 24)

Professor Frink accidentally ignites a black hole over Springfield ("The Greatest Story Ever Holed"), Homer gets it on with a demon (their safe word is cinnamon!) in the *Paranormal Activity* spoof "Un-Normal Activity," and Jon Lovitz returns as grabby Artie Ziff ("Bart and Homer's Excellent Adventure").

24. "Treehouse of Horror XVIII"

(SEASON 19)

Kodos is everyone's favorite lovable extraterrestrial ("E.T., Go Home"). Of course, he's hysterically devious, with outlandish plans of a planetary takeover. The *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* flip doesn't disappoint, but the *Seven Deadly Sins* finale "Heck House" never gets off the ground.

23. "Treehouse of Horror XVII"

(SEASON 18)

Homer becomes a massive jelly-like monster ("Married to the Blob") devouring the citizens of Springfield. "You Gotta Know When to Golem" aims higher, with the late Richard Lewis voicing the iconic silent film creature. And Maurice LaMarche drops a dead-on Orson Welles impression in the superb "The Day the Earth Looked Stupid."

22. "Treehouse of Horror XXVIII"

(SEASON 29)

Treehouse finally gets around to parodying *The Exorcist* ("The Exor-Sis"), and it lives up to the anticipation. The landmark 1973 horror film's director, William Friedkin, even makes a voice appearance in the shocking "Mmm…Homer" as an addiction counselor attempting to stop Marge's husband from cannibalizing himself.

21. "Treehouse of Horror XVI"

(SEASON 17)

Beyond the aimless *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* farce, "Survival of the Fattest" picks up the pace as Marge saves the day with a frying pan. "I've Grown a Costume on Your Face" is one of the more underrated "Treehouse" set pieces. A scornful witch transforms the residents of Springfield into their Halloween costumes. Principle Skinner discovers what being an anatomically correct G.I. Joe truly means.

20. "Treehouse of Horror XIX"

(SEASON 20)

The MVP here is "It's the Grand Pumpkin, Milhouse," an irreverent love letter to the classic 1966 Peanuts Halloween special. A trombone-blowing Marge stands in as the "adult" voice. Bart and Lisa excel as Charlie Brown and Sally. And a blanket-clutching Milhouse (Linus) conjures a vengeful pumpkin god, who shockingly turns out to be a bigot.

19. "Treehouse of Horror XXI"

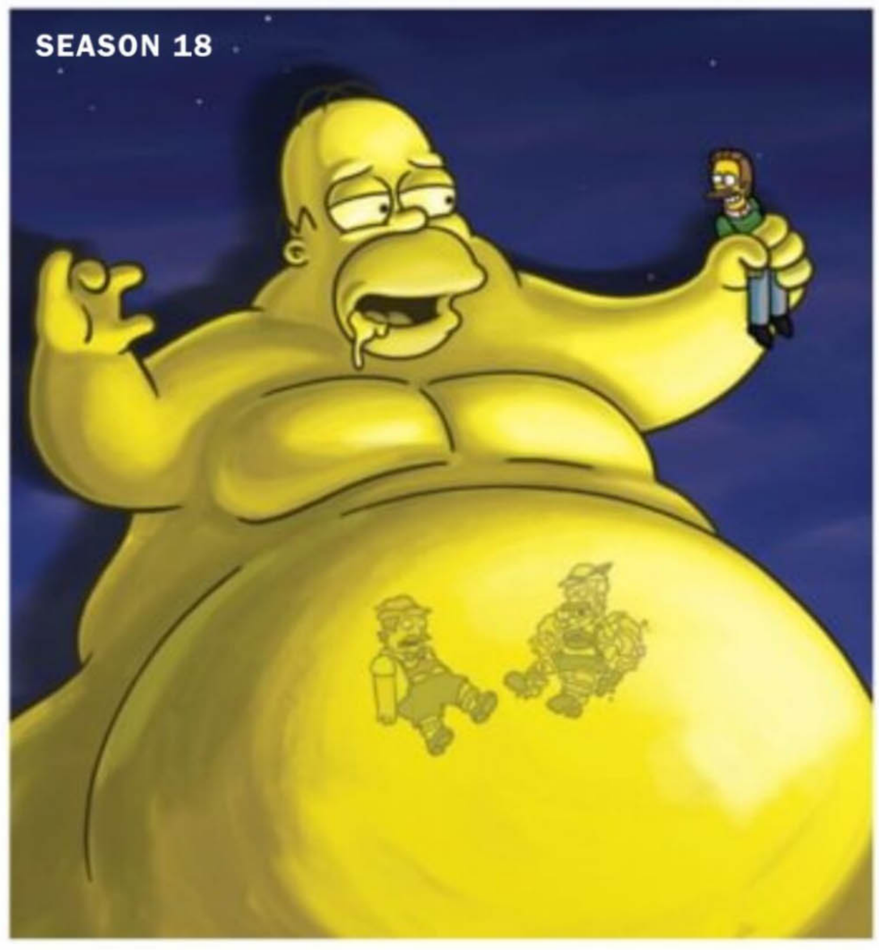
(SEASON 22)

When "Treehouse" goes for real scares, the material rises. A bloody Hugh Laurie–featured *Dead Calm* whodunit ("Master and Cadaver") ends with Marge's suicide after eating a poisoned pie. Good thing Maggie imagined the entire thing—right?

18. "Treehouse of Horror XII"

(SEASON 13)

Headliner Pierce Brosnan contributes his dashing voice as a robotic house obsessed with Marge ("House of Whacks"). The gypsy-cursed "Hex and



MATT GROENING

the City" is "Treehouse" soul food. And kudos to the writers for jumping on the Harry Potter phenomenon ("Wiz Kids") before everyone else in Hollywood.

17. "Treehouse of Horror X"

(SEASON 11)

Bart (Stretch Dude) and Lisa (Clobber Girl) become superheroes in "Desperately Xeeking Xena," a chuckle-worthy pre-Marvelmania takeoff (Comic Book Guy as insane super villain the Collector is the chef's kiss). A lively *I Know What You Did Last Summer* piece goes werewolf, and "Life's a Glitch, Then You Die" takes on Y2K.

16. "Treehouse of Horror XXVII"

(SEASON 28)

Lisa gets an imaginary friend ("BFF R.I.P.") who turns out to not be very friendly. The murderous Rachel (voiced by Sarah Silverman) stacks up a body count that would make *Friday the 13th*'s Jason proud. The other segments feature Lisa doing her best Mad Max ("Dry Hard") and a wobbly *Goldfinger*/*Kingsman: The Secret Service* spoof saved by an appearance from Steely Dan's Donald Fagan performing "Babylon Sister" as Bart and crew deliver beatdowns.

15. "Treehouse of Horror IX"

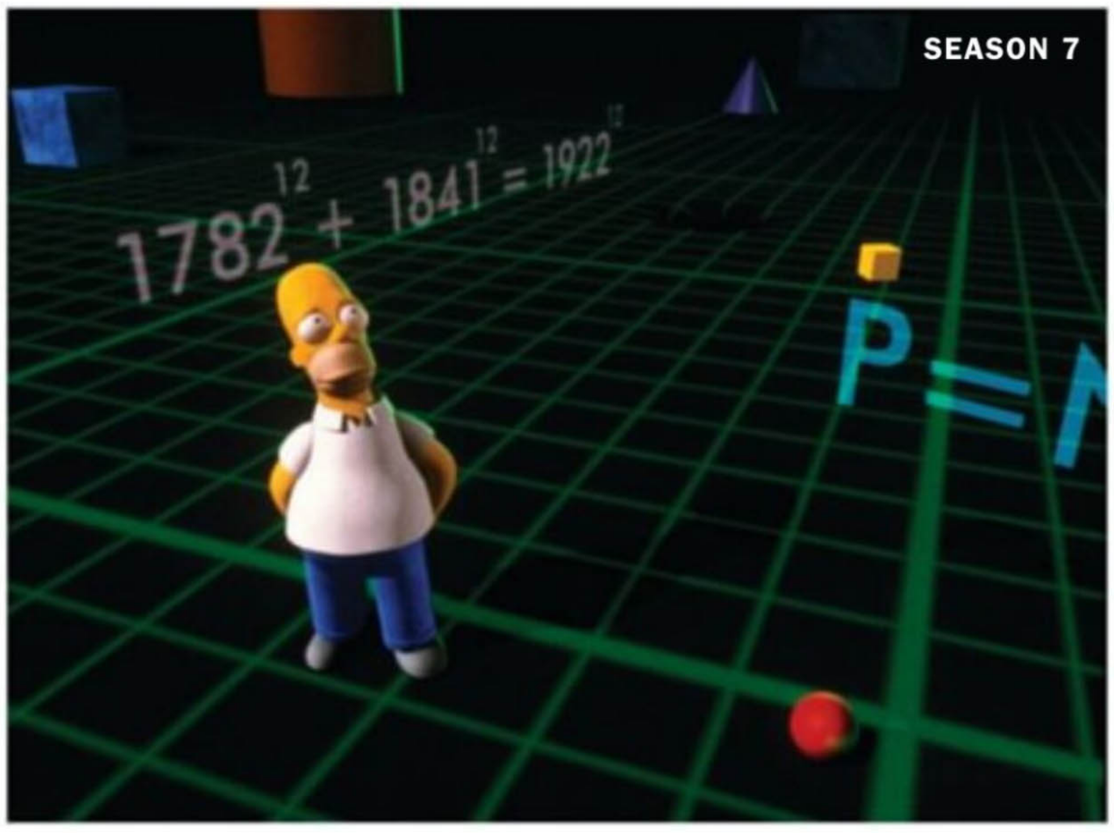
(SEASON 10)

Snake gets his close-up in the riotous "Hell Toupée," in which the executed criminal's possessed mane turns Homer into a killer. "The Terror of Tiny Toon" pushes the requisite Itchy and Scratchy violence, and Maggie turns out to be the Rigellian daughter of Kang ("Starship Poopers"), leading to an all-out Jerry Springer brawl.

14. "Treehouse of Horror XXXI"

(SEASON 32)

This one opens with Homer voting in the COVID-19-era 2020 presidential election. Donald Trump



gets skewered, which makes our current situation all the more ominous. But the mood lightens with the Pixar art–driven "Toy Gory," multiple Homers, and Lisa as the time-looping *Russian Doll*.

13. "Treehouse of Horror XXXV"

(SEASON 36)

The most recent "Treehouse" comes out swinging. "Denim," a *Venom* satire, is dumb fun, and a *Pacific Rim* spoof gets political yet plays it safe. But the crown jewel is the visually stunning "Fall of the House of Monty," based on Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." Evil Mr. Burns is haunted by dead factory workers from his corn syrup plant. You'll never want to hear the words "jump scare" ever again.

12. "Treehouse of Horror XX"

(SEASON 21)

Classic Universal movie monsters crash the Simpsons' Halloween party in costume. (SpongeBob Frankenstein—ha!) From there, we get a stylized black-and-white nod to Alfred Hitchcock, a Krusty-propelled *28 Days Later*–inspired zombie romp, and a bonkers *Sweeney Todd*–adjacent musical.

11. "Treehouse of Horror XXXIII"

(SEASON 34)

"Oh, Maggie, I'm so sorry I got possessed and almost chopped you up into little pieces," apologizes Marge in the surprisingly frightening *Babadook* pastiche "Pookadook." The dark anime-style "Death Tome" continues this "Treehouse" episode's boundless momentum, followed by a *Westworld* spoof ("Simpsons World") that sticks the landing.

10. "Treehouse of Horror XXV"

(SEASON 26)

What's funnier than Bart excelling in school? Bart being named valedictorian of his class in Hades ("School Is Hell"). Stanley Kubrick gets his flowers ("A Clockwork Yellow"), and the *Tracey Ullman Show* Simpsons haunt the modern version in an ode to *The Others*. No skips.

9. "Treehouse of Horror XXIV"

(SEASON 25)

Guillermo del Toro directs the most inventive Treehouse couch gag to date, featuring a who's who of horror/sci-fi, including a trippy *Pan's Labyrinth* segue. The demented Dr. Seuss jest "Oh, the Places You'll D'oh!" literally slays. Bart's head surgically attached to Lisa's body ("Dead and Shoulders")? Sick. And the *Freaks* jump-off ("Freaks, No Geeks") is all heart.

8. "Treehouse of Horror VIII"

(SEASON 9)

No weak links here as we meet a pompous Fox censor who gets stabbed to death by a TV-ratings logo. Nice. And really, what's more old-school spooky than three witches inventing trick or treat after a broom-flying Marge gets some well-deserved payback on hateful villagers?

7. "Treehouse of Horror II"

(SEASON 3)

The greatness of the early Treehouse entries is in their cohesion. After gorging on Halloween candy, nightmares ensue. Lisa uses a cursed monkey's paw to wish for world peace, leaving Earth defenseless against invading aliens. Bart doubles as Anthony Fremont of *Twilight Zone* lore, and Homer becomes Mr. Burns' mad scientist experiment.

6. "Treehouse of Horror III"

(SEASON 4)

Back when it was still billed "The Simpsons Halloween Special," the punchiness came fast and furious. Bart: "Dad, you killed the zombie Flanders!"

Homer: "He was a zombie?" All three stories are stacked, led by "King Homer" and its classic mic drop by Smithers.

5. "Treehouse of Horror VII"

(SEASON 8)

Few shows have mastered political farce like *The Simpsons*. Which is why, amid the excellent "The Thing and I" and "The Genesis Tub," "Citizen Kang" stands out. After abducting President Clinton and Senator Bob Dole, aliens Kang and Kodos take their place ahead of the 1996 election. Kodos/Clinton: "It's a two-party system! You have to vote for one of us!"

4. "Treehouse of Horror VI"

(SEASON 7)

This one boasts the series' most groundbreaking animation (the celebrated computer-generated 3D bit "Homer^3") and horror parody (Groundskeeper Willie as Freddy Krueger is top-tier hilarity). So it's understandable why the entertaining middle clip featuring a giant Lard Lad Donuts Boy wreaking havoc on Springfield often gets overlooked.

3. "Treehouse of Horror IV"

(SEASON 5)

"It's always the one you least expect," chuckles an unholy Ned Flanders, aka Satan. Add the great Phil Hartman's comically incompetent lawyer Lionel Hutz advocating for Homer's soul, and you have "Treehouse" bliss. The eclectic *Night Gallery*–themed set also offers another great *Twilight Zone* nod ("Terror at 5+1/2 Feet") and a screaming send-up of Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 Victorian-age *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

2. "Treehouse of Horror I"

(SEASON 2)

The inaugural "Treehouse" kicks off with Marge issuing a tongue-in-cheek parental warning for viewers to tuck their kids into bed "instead of writing us angry letters tomorrow." This is also the only Halloween special that actually takes place in a treehouse, as Bart and Lisa swap superlative scary stories. Tops among them: the legitimately creepy (and serious!) retelling of Poe's *The Raven*, narrated by the late great James Earl Jones.

1. "Treehouse of Horror V"

(SEASON 6)

Leave it to a crazed Homer to slack off on murdering his family in a flawless spoof of *The Shining* ("Some of the ghouls and I are concerned the project isn't moving forward," says a passive-aggressive Moe, doubling as sinister ghost bartender Lloyd). Homer breaks time traveling; Springfield Elementary staff cannibalizes students; Willie dies…a lot. "I'm going to enjoy devouring you, Bart Simpson," delights Principal Skinner. Peak "Treehouse." ◻

SEASON 2

SEASON 5

MATT GROENING

Journey to the Big Screen

On the eve of *The Simpsons*' 2007 leap to the multiplex, the producers and writers reflected on their long and grueling attempt to make the Best. Movie. Ever.

BY DAN SNIERSON

The Simpsons Movie
opened on July 25, 2007, and ultimately earned $536 million at the worldwide box office.
THE SIMPSONS
MOVIE
MATT GROENING

CODE NAME: YELLOW HARVEST. It's a perilous project that's required years of plotting (up to 18 years, depending on who's counting) and the complicated synergies of hundreds of individuals (some not quite human). It triggered surprise, curiosity, glee, anxiety, and a nationwide epidemic of finger-crossing. But on this June afternoon in L.A. in 2007, it's just a bunch of guys trying to beat a deadline.

Tucked away on the Fox lot, inside a nondescript trailer labeled Stacked Productions—the placard from Pamela Anderson's 2005 sitcom was left hanging to foil interlopers—two dozen staffers slave over monitors containing America's most famous animated family in various high jinks, like Homer spotting a fallen treat: "Ooooh! Floor popcorn!" Signs of time crunch are everywhere. A chart of scenes with titles like "Eski-Moe's Tavern" is covered with colored stickers indicating completion status. A calendar is smothered in notes about production sessions and deadlines. And then there's the world's least gentle reminder: Above one poor soul's workstation, a digital clock counts down the time left until this motion picture of major proportions, *The Simpsons Movie*, must be surrendered to the studio authorities. "We use it as a means to frighten

Clockwise, from above: The Simpsons attempt to flee an angry mob; Maggie fends off Krusty's monkey, Mr. Teeny; Homer comes in like a wrecking ball to save his family.

ourselves," explains producer Richard Sakai, studying its unforgiving flashes: 16 days, 9 hours, 42 minutes, 6 seconds…5 seconds…4 seconds….

A doughnut's throw away, the film's writer-producers—James L. Brooks, Matt Groening, Al Jean, and Mike Scully—give notes on newly minted footage. "If a joke's not working," deadpans Scully, "put a loud car horn over it or a plane flying by." In one scene, three townsfolk come pleading to Mr. Burns. "So you want some of my electricity, do you?" snickers the sinister senior tycoon. "Well, for once, the rich white man is in control!" When the Springfield residents are chased away by ferocious hounds, the scribes look relieved. "That's an area we've changed 300 times," says Jean, shaking his head. "We should put in all the takes," cracks Groening. Retorts Jean: "It'd be longer than *Gone with the Wind*."

Indeed, this has already become one epic cinematic journey. "It's very hard to believe the end of the road is here," muses Brooks. "You're crazy not to be excited, and you're crazy not to, um, uh…" He trails off before finding the right words with a grin: "…wake up on a mattress full of flop sweat."

No need for nerves, guys: You're only making one of the most anticipated films since the concept of ever was invented. A month later, Fox's worshipped, Emmy-encrusted comedy was set to hit theaters. *The Simpsons Movie* featured an emotional saga about a man who falls for a pig, ignores his wife's advice, and potentially dooms his town. It also aims to honor the show's rich history, with physical gags, corner-of-your-screen winks, and beloved Springfieldians (Nelson! Chief Wiggum! That old man with the ZZ Top beard!). Yet this 35mm mission wasn't easy: Cows were had, shorts eaten. But

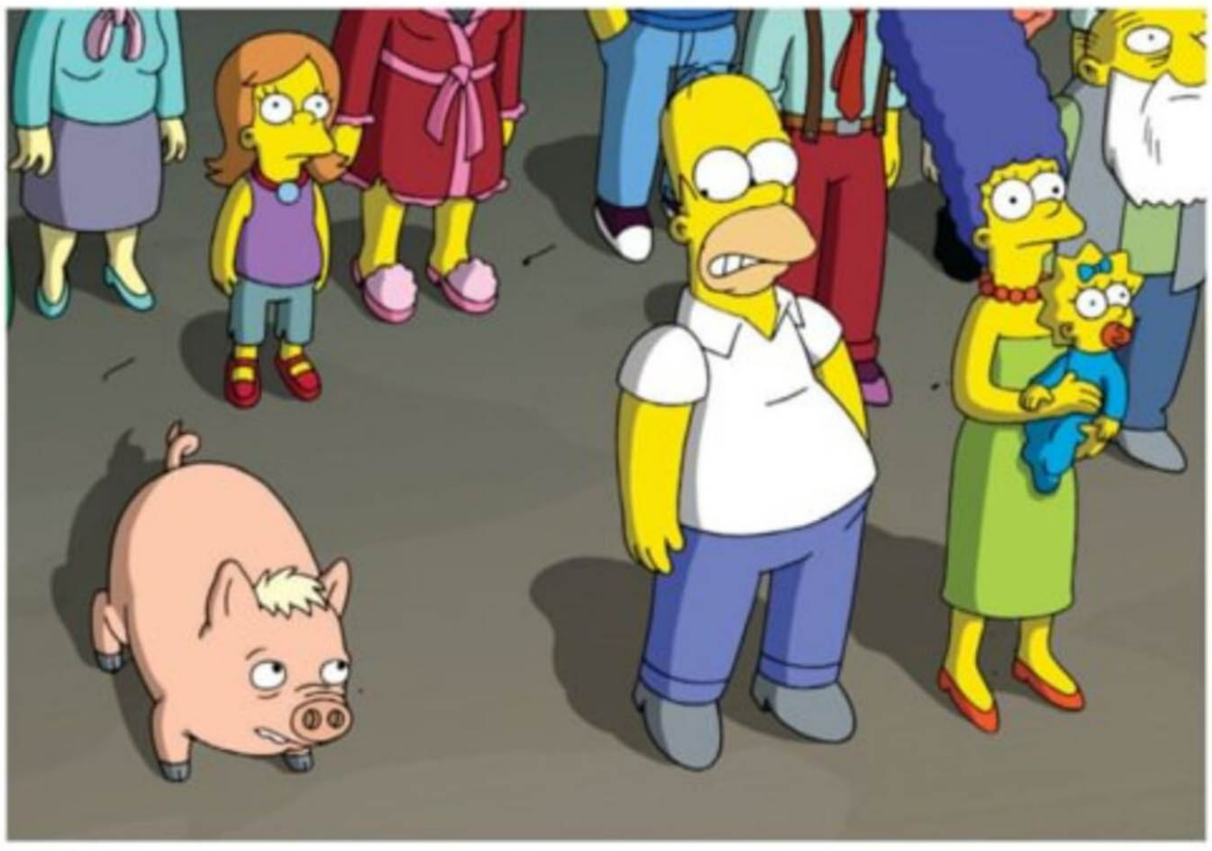
after all the blood, sweat, and Duff beers, Homer's helpers think they've created something entertaining enough to pay for, maybe even woo-hoo!-worthy. And they know what's at stake—a billion-plus-dollar franchise's good name. "Nobody wants to be the one who rams the ship into the iceberg," says Groening, who first scribbled the Simpson clan in 1987 for Brooks' *The Tracey Ullman Show*.

Or, as Jean sums up: "As an event, I think it'll be somewhere between *Sgt. Pepper's* the album and *Sgt. Pepper's* the movie."

THERE HAD BEEN WHISPERS, RUMORS, EVEN discussions about a *Simpsons* movie for a long time. As in, let's brainstorm over Crystal Pepsi long. The closest flirtation came in 1992, when Brooks wondered if the first cut of the "Kamp Krusty" episode could be expanded into a feature. But back in those early, heady days of the show, when bootleggers hawked Bart T-shirts on street corners, the staff was too busy churning out episodes to multitask multiplex-style.

That wasn't the only hurdle. Fox had long balked at Brooks' terms, which were: Commission us to write a script, but if we don't like the results, we don't have to make a movie. "It was a tough point for them to swallow," admits the producer. "But it was very necessary for us to feel secure as we moved forward. It was an odd contract dispute—we were arguing against a green light." However, Tom Rothman wanted that green light badly, so when he became studio president back in 1999, he persuaded the powers that be to accept Brooks' conditions. "Regardless of what it said on a piece of paper, if Jim Brooks and Matt Groening weren't happy with the movie, it wasn't a movie we should make," Rothman reasons.

While the big screen loomed as the ultimate challenge ("It's like Mount Everest—you try to do it because you can," says Jean), most at *Simpsons* HQ thought they'd strap on the crampons after TV's



Homer's illegal disposal of his pig's droppings leads the government to trap Springfield under a dome. As usual, he redeems himself in the end.

longest-running comedy was retired. But as it became apparent that the series wasn't going anywhere, "we figured we'd better get started," quips Scully.

In 2001, the main voice actors signed a three-season extension with a film provision. Brooks thought it'd be "romantic" to reunite with early-days *Simpsons* players, so he and Groening slowly assembled an all-star team. Veteran series director David Silverman was hired to helm. (He'd left Pixar in anticipation of the gig: "Steve Jobs said if it'd been for any other reason, he would've been very upset with me," he recalls.) Longtime showrunner Scully and then- current showrunner Jean were tapped to produce. The latter must have been mainlining Buzz Cola: Jean oversaw the writers room while continuing episodic duties. The room was filled with ex-executive producers and scribes. (For you hardcores, that list included George Meyer, John Swartzwelder, John Vitti, David Mirkin, and Mike Reiss; Ian Maxtone-Graham and Matt Selman joined in later.) Two high-profile yet not surprising exclusions: Sam Simon, who'd codeveloped the series with Groening and Brooks but left over creative differences in 1993, and writer-producer turned late-night star Conan O'Brien, who Jean says would've laughed off an invite. "That makes no sense," responds O'Brien. "I cleared my talk-show schedule for a year at great financial cost to myself, got an apartment right outside the Fox lot, and told them I was ready to report to work. All I heard back was that they were having trouble finding me a parking space, and then they stopped returning my calls altogether. I am stunned and disappointed."

When Springfield's finest gathered in 2003, they were well aware of the challenges—and skepticism—ahead. "The idea of doing a movie spin-off from a TV show smells bad, y'know?" says Groening. "*South Park* was proof that you could do something really funny and different from the show. If you weren't familiar with *South Park*, it was a great movie, and if you knew it, then it was even better." There was also that weensy issue of digging up a fresh plot. Says Scully: "Story-wise, character-wise, joke-wise—after 400 episodes, we feel like not only have we done it all, we've done it all three times, and the audience has been very kind not to notice."

Soon, though, ideas began flowing like Squishees. What if the Simpsons discover that their lives are being filmed for a reality show? What if Marge leaves Homer after he cluelessly rents out their house for a porn shoot, and she becomes a manatee rescuer? (This second pitch, from Jean, was later developed into Season 17's opener, "Bonfire of the Manatees.") But it wasn't until Groening mentioned an article he'd read about a community battling hog-waste pollution that the writers found their hammy inspiration for the plot: Homer adopts a pig and dumps a silo of its leavings into an already iffy Lake Springfield. An environmental catastrophe is triggered, turning Homer into public enemy numero uno and putting the town in dire jeopardy.

Wait. The movie hinges on…pig poop? "When you put it that way, which is the truth, it sounds a little crude," says Jean, "but we've done it in the most sophisticated, elegant, satirical fashion possible."

After each writer penned a 20-page portion of the script, they met at the *Simpsons* production offices to stitch together their beast—a pastiche of wild jokes—and begin reworking. Fortunately, they had a mentor in the multi-Oscared writer-director-producer Brooks. "You couldn't just slap four episodes together and call it a movie," says Scully. "You need to let the audience into the emotion of the story. Sometimes when you are in a room

full of guys, you're thinking of this really sweet Lisa line, but you just can't bring yourself to say it. And Jim is not afraid to find the heart." For a pivotal scene in which a crushed Marge bares her soul to Homer, Brooks would ask Julie Kavner for more than 100 takes. The result, according to Groening, "is probably the most touching thing we've done in the history of the show."

The screenwriters had to overcome more than mental obstacles, judging from the faint odor of Raid and musty uncle in the room. "The carpet is covered with stains of sitcoms past," says Scully. "And I think the Pauly Shore show was written in this room." Haunted by a cawing crow perched outside the door, they literally sweated out the script—the crappy AC unit was too loud to use—in this confined space, season after season. "Most of the people in the room are used to running the show," says Groening. "It could've been ugly, but it was really fun. Only a couple of times were there

REVIEW

THE SIMPSONS, BIGGER AND BETTER

The movie "finds its own pace, and it keeps its personality," TIME's critic raved in 2007.

BY RICHARD CORLISS

IN EPISODE 607 OF *SOUTH PARK*, Butters, in his guise as Professor Chaos, dreams up a host of insidious schemes—blocking out the sun, decapitating a South Park statue, selling the town a monorail—only to be told that these have already been spun out on a certain animated TV series. "How come every time I think of something clever," Butters asks, "*The Simpsons* already did it?"

The episode was a tribute from one cadre of cartoon geniuses—*South Park*'s Trey Parker and Matt Stone—to another, earlier one: Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, and their team of highly educated misfits, who developed Groening's crudely drawn one-minute *Tracey Ullman Show* vignettes of a chinless yellow family into a half-hour sitcom, nay, veritable comedy cosmos that this fall begins its record-breaking 19th season on Fox.

Once they had produced 400 shows and run a zillion variations on Homer's Brobdingnagian stupidity, Marge's slow burn, Bart's overachieving impishness, Lisa's displaced intelligence, and Maggie's muteness, *The Simpsons*' caretakers faced another challenge. How could they expand 22 minutes of content into a coherent, cholerically funny, 87-minute, worth-paying-for laff riot shown on a wall in a mall? And beyond how—why? Maybe because Parker and Stone had proved it could be done, splendidly, with their 1999 *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*. Anyway, here's *The Simpsons Movie*. It was worth waiting for.

In an ecologically threatened Springfield, Homer fouls the local lake with the refuse of a pig he's fallen in love with. The place is declared a disaster area, and an evil government bureaucrat orders that the town be domed. Having alienated everyone with his idiocy, Homer must prove himself a hero: "Risking my life—to save people I hate—for reasons I don't really understand."

The film, written by 11 guys, and directed by David Silverman in the old-fashioned, hand-drawn way, looks surprisingly spiffy on the big screen. It's rated PG-13 (for brief frontal nudity), but vulgarity has never been the envelope *The Simpsons* pushed. Its goal is density, comic congestion, the vacuum-packing of cool gags and grotesque-sympathetic characters into the shortest span possible.

The little miracle of the movie is that this plays out at four times the length without giving you a headache. The film finds its own pace, and it keeps its personality. It doesn't try to be ruder or kinkier, just bigger and better. It follows a rule Brooks laid down at the beginning of the series: Don't be afraid to show emotion. Audience, that goes for you too when you watch Homer and Marge's worst-ever marital crisis. Sob away unabashedly.

So, for those of you who were wondering if a great TV show could top itself at feature-film length, the good news is that *The Simpsons* did it! But *South Park* did it first.

mock stranglings—you know, in the style of Homer strangling Bart. But that was never about content. It was about fatigue."

Gradually, the movie's plot evolved. After Homer's toxic blunder, the Simpsons flee to Alaska, where Homer and Marge clash over whether to save Springfield. Meanwhile, Bart wonders if dorky saint Ned Flanders would be a better father than Homer, and Lisa falls for a green-activist Irish kid named Colin. In other news, Arnold Schwarzenegger is president, and the head of the EPA is evil.

In May 2005, the voice actors—including Dan Castellaneta (Homer), Julie Kavner (Marge), Nancy Cartwright (Bart), Yeardley Smith (Lisa), Harry Shearer (Mr. Burns), and Hank Azaria (Wiggum)—received some surprising news. A script for a *Simpsons* movie had been written. "I showed up, and the script—I couldn't believe it!" exclaims Cartwright. "It was thick. I'm spreading my fingers apart, trying to guess how much that is…." Pause. "That's, like, three inches!"

Oh, and there were the hundreds of pages of rewrites. *Simpsons* episodes typically undergo heavy changes, but this production endured endless additions, deletions, and punch-ups. "I don't consider myself an environmentalist," says Scully, "but even I felt bad about the number of trees that were felled during the writing of this movie." While you will see Green Day punk up the *Simpsons* theme song during their worst gig ever, Albert Brooks as EPA chief Russ Cargill, and a Tom Hanks cameo ("the most trusted superstar in America sullies himself in our cartoon," says Groening), contributions from Minnie Driver, Isla Fisher, and Erin Brockovich hit the cutting-room floor. Meanwhile, the regular cast remained on call. "I felt like a fireman," says Castellaneta. "We should've just lived above the recording studio and put a pole in.… I didn't know what stayed in, what went out. I couldn't even follow what the story was—I just knew it was funny." Recalls Cartwright: "They'd say, 'Can you come in? We've got a little rewrite.' And I'm not kidding, it was down to one word.… I was amazed at how many different ways I could say that one word!"

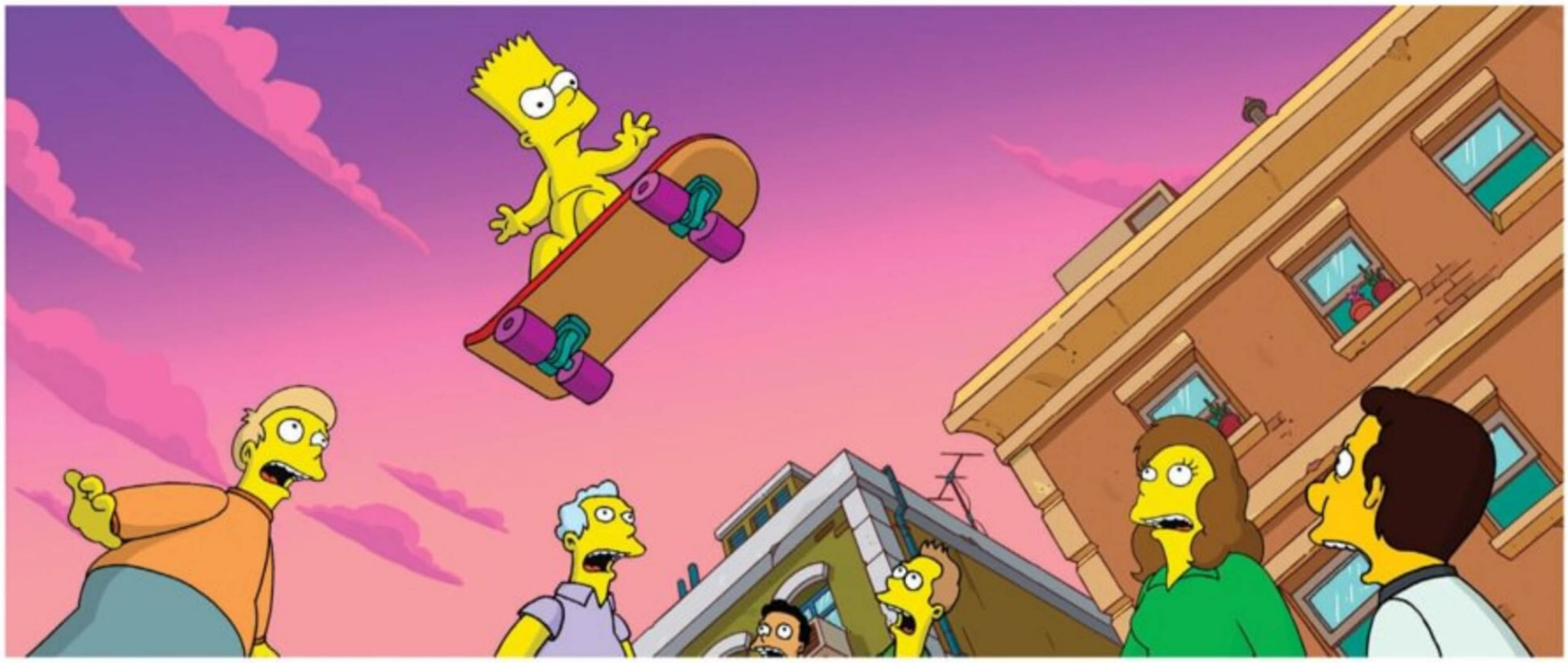
"You couldn't just slap four episodes together and call it a movie. You need to let the audience into the emotion of the story."

–MIKE SCULLY

AN ANIMATED FIELD OP IS GOING DOWN inside a pink building. Here at Burbank's Film Roman 11 days before delivery, Silverman is putting out fires and lighting other ones, ninja-ing his way through phone calls and questions from staffers popping into his office: "Thirteen feet, four frames? Great horny toad! It should've been 9 foot 4!" "Homer needs at least another in-between on this robot dance!" "Is this your recut based on his recut?" During a break, he explains with a shrug: "It always comes together at the end. But it's gonna be a nail-biter."

Since January 2006, he's been fastidiously translating those yellow creatures to the big screen (with a different aspect ratio, for maximum wide-screen effect). "I'm really glad it took us this long to make the film," he says. "The computer technology [has improved] on every level, from compositing to editing voice. We could've never done this in '93." While nifty tech, an intricate color palette, a Hans Zimmer score, and a $75 million budget helped provide a more lush vibe for Springfield, Silverman remained true to the show's hand-drawn ethos. And his crews at Film Roman and Rough Draft studios often found new ways to fatigue fingers: A short angry-mob scene, teased in trailers, required up to 3,600 drawings.

Yet the most important word at *Simpsons* HQ was mum: A veil of secrecy was wrapped tightly around the project. In addition to your usual script-shredding and confidentiality-agreement signings, the Yellow Harvest alias—Sakai's wink to *Return of the Jedi* code name Blue Harvest—was used to confound the curious. And then, in March 2006, the producers cooked up a trailer that was slipped into theaters before *Ice Age: The Meltdown*. This surprise generated so much fan saliva, "it just became fun to see how long we could keep it private," says Brooks. That included the leaking of bogus spoilers: Homer gets superpowers! Homer runs for president! "We were always afraid we'd put out a false plot that might be better than the one we were doing," Brooks says.



Bart skateboards naked across Springfield on a dare from Homer—briefly exposing himself to the audience. That may have contributed to the film's PG-13 rating.

Considering the stratospheric hopes of those line-reciting, episode-ranking fans, a little paranoia could be forgiven. Brooks, who says this project carries far greater expectations than any other in his career, confides: "There are few things that make your blood curdle more than somebody saying, 'I bet it's going to be the greatest ever!'" Adds Jean: "I think if I felt any more pressure, I'd be a diamond."

Thankfully, no stones were thrown during a Portland, Oregon, test screening in March 2007. Audience response was positive, minus a few criticisms. As a result, the producers strengthened or lost secondary characters' bits—the film has 98 speaking parts—and ditched a meta end-credits gag in which resident aliens Kang and Kodos pick apart the film. Also from this rewrite came a trailer highlight: Homer playing with his pig while singing "Spider-Pig/Spider-Pig/Does whatever a Spider-Pig does." After more screenings and tweaking—jokes were being added in the final few days—even the Sultan of Sweat was pleased. Says Brooks: "I know the picture is funny."

What the *Simpsons* masterminds also know is that trying to please all diehards and successfully corral 18 seasons of minutiae into 86 minutes and 45 seconds is like Homer trying to restrain himself in a candy store: Ain't gonna happen. "Listen, I've stood in line for the restroom at Comic-Con every year, and whatever the big movie is, I've heard the real-life versions of Comic Book Guy, so we're prepared for all kinds of reactions," says Groening. "Everybody's got a different idea of the perfect *Simpsons* experience. People are going to say, 'You put in Lenny—why not Carl?'" He pauses. "We have both, by the way, for all those Carl fans out there."

But have some of those Carl fans tuned out while holding their breath for the movie? Although the series still nets nice ratings demos, it's not the juggernaut it once was. The show's principals would be concerned if fans weren't persistently peppering them with movie questions. Fox's Rothman maintains that the wait signals this isn't a cash grab. "Look, it's a triumph it got done in the aughts," he says. "We accepted a long time ago that they were going to do this on their own time frame. We weren't worried, because Homer Simpson was going to be a fantastic character in 2007 or 2010."

Blockbuster or bust, the filmmakers hope to accomplish one sentimental goal: create a communal living-room experience. "Whenever we show clips from an episode to an audience, it gets such an amazing reaction, [because] you're so used to watching TV alone," says Groening. "I'm hoping a lot of people begin dating and marrying as a result of this movie—meeting in the lobby, sharing some popcorn, and taking it from there." □

CHAPTER

3

SIMPSON MANIA

Over the decades,
the show has earned a
level of devotion, fan scrutiny,
and industry influence
that rivals any
pop culture property.

Michael Baxter of Australia had 203 Simpsons *characters tattooed on his back, earning him a Guinness World Record in 2015.*

The Cult of *The Simpsons*

The writers have long embraced—and sometimes playfully skewered—the most passionate factions of the show's fan base.

BY KEITH MURPHY

IF EVER THERE WERE AN EPISODE THAT perfectly encapsulates the passionate, joyful, absurd, and at times toxic fandom of *The Simpsons,* it would be Season 8's "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show." In the acclaimed 1997 episode, Krusty the Clown threatens to cancel the ridiculously violent *Itchy & Scratchy* cartoon from his program due to spiraling ratings. Following a farcical kids focus group, cynical executives push the writers to create Poochie, a hat-to-the-back, rapping "dog with attitude" to reenergize the violent and laughably one-sided *Herman and Katnip* send-up.

Homer auditions for the voice of the obnoxious canine and lands the gig. But Lisa is skeptical. "Adding a new character is often a desperate attempt to boost low ratings," she says. On cue, a "hip" new face, cousin Roy, suddenly appears at the dinner table: "Yo, yo! How's it hanging, everybody?" It remains one of the ultimate meta

Simpsons *merchandise includes action figures, toys, clothing, and accessories.*
THE SIMPSONS
BENDABLE • POSEABLE
ITCHY & SCRATCHY
PAIN-O-METER
TIN ACTION TOY!
Pin Pals
METAL
Included
MONOPOLY
WELCOME TO SPRINGFIELD
FOR SALE
Snow Globe

Homer voiced Poochie, whose addition to The Itchy & Scratchy Show *bombed (left); Comic Book Guy (opposite, with guest star Stan Lee) is often a stand-in for disgruntled fans.*

Simpsons episodes, ending with fans revolting against Poochie, who is unceremoniously killed off of the program.

"Poochie is particularly bad because at the time the network wanted us to add a new character," recalls *Simpsons* executive producer and writer Al Jean, who has been a part of the series since its 1989 inception. "We've added characters before, but I've always been resistant to generically planting a character the way a sitcom does. They bring in an actor to play six out of 13 episodes. That's not *The Simpsons*."

But what began as a sly middle finger to meddling Fox executives ultimately became a full-blown commentary on fan culture. For years there has been chatter from a segment of hardcore fans that *The Simpsons* has lost its mojo, criticism that the show's writers famously responded to in a classic exchange between Bart and fan favorite Comic Book Guy (voiced by Hank Azaria).

When the sarcastic know-it-all owner of Springfield's The Android's Dungeon & Baseball Card Shop levies his sneering disgust at the revamped *Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show*, TV's most iconic 10-year-old (with all apologies to Eric Cartman) pushes back.

"Hey, I know it wasn't great, but what right do you have to complain?" contends Bart. "As a loyal viewer, I feel they owe me," responds Comic Book Guy. Bart is taken aback. "What? They're giving you thousands of hours of entertainment for free. What could they possibly owe you? If anything, you owe them," he says. Comic Book Guy then delivers this memorable mic drop: "Worst. Episode. Ever."

"That actually came from online," explains Jean, alluding to a fan who, after watching the 1992 episode "Itchy and Scratchy: The Movie," posted a succinct three-word "worst episode ever" takedown on alt.tv.simpsons, a throwback online Usernet newsgroup inhabited by dedicated followers. The sardonic Comic Book Guy line would go on to become one of the series' most ubiquitous catchphrases. "One of the writers, David Cohen, put it in the show," continues Jean. "It resonated with the people because it comes from the people."

For decades, *Simpsons* writers have leaned into the show's hardcore fandom. In the early '90s prehistoric age before the internet lived up to the promise of a worldwide web, and before the dawn of social media, *Simpsons* obsessives freeze-framed their VCRs to spot inside jokes in background scenes.

Back then, the relationship between diehard viewers and the series' creatives exuded a seemingly innocent, communal spirit. A 2013 *Slate* article titled "Best Message Board Ever" documented early *Simpsons* internet fandom. Like-minded diehards frequented these exclusive spaces, where they could discuss plots and Easter eggs and post lists of their favorite characters and chalkboard and couch gags.

Not only did former *Simpsons* producer Bill Oakley lurk on alt.tv.simpsons, he also posted a July 25, 1993, preview of Season 5, a bold move that in today's soulless streaming biz would give showrunners night sweats.

"The 'NOT YET WRITTEN' portion of the post mentioned the working titles of future classics, including 'Lisa's Hockey Team,' 'Summer Swimming Pool/Rear Window Parody,' and 'Bart Gets a Girlfriend,'" wrote *Slate*'s Alan Siegel.

The *Simpsons* team even dropped on-air shoutouts to its dedicated hive. In the 2002 episode "The Frying Game," Homer, after discovering that an old lady has been stabbed to death with a pair of scissors, unleashes a "SNUH cascade." The inside baseball reference was a wink to fans who turned a Season 2 Marge protest sign gag, "Springfieldians for Nonviolence, Understanding, and Helping" (SNUH), into one of the earliest memes.

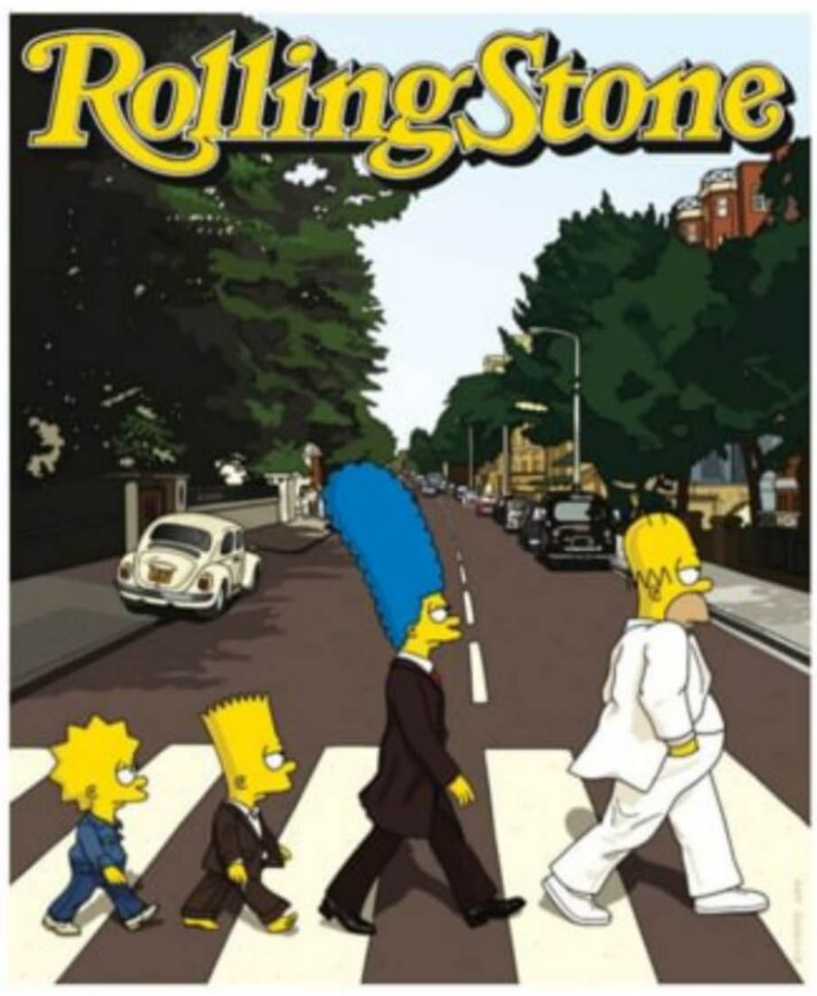
This is the same fervent group that mourned the 2024 death of background character Larry the Barfly, who for 35 years was a quiet, inebriated regular at Moe's Tavern. One viewer's emotional online post summed up the collective gut punch: "Just learned they are killing off Larry on *The Simpsons* tomorrow. I need a minute."

Outside of the Star Wars universe, you would be hard-pressed to find a more impassioned fan base than Simpsons aficionados.

That same year, fans brought out the pitchforks when there was talk that *The Simpsons* would end a long-running gag of Homer choking Bart, which was hinted at in the Season 35 episode "McMansion & Wife." "See, Marge, strangling the boy paid off," Homer says. "Just kidding, I don't do that anymore. Times have changed."

Longtime executive producer and series co-creator James L. Brooks dismissed the notion altogether. "Don't think for a second we're changing anything," he told *People*. "Nothing's getting tamed. Nothing, nothing, nothing.... He'll continue to be strangled—[if] you want to use that awful term for it. He'll continue to be loved by his father in a specific way."

MATT GROENING



TV GUIDE
Grand-slam HOMER!
After hitting 300-episodes, that is-over 14 batty seasons, there's no question that The Simpsons is Hall of Fame material
PLUS: NASCAR ALL-STARS GEAR UP!
TV GOES TO WAR

The Simpsons have graced the covers of numerous national magazines. Opposite: A themed roller coaster debuted at Universal Studios parks in Florida and California in 2008.

Indeed, outside of the Star Wars universe, you would be hard-pressed to find a more impassioned fan base. Jean got his first taste of the *Simpsons* phenomenon early in the show's run during a vacation in Orlando, Florida. "I remember I was wearing a *Simpsons* show jacket at Disney World right after the first episode had aired," he recalls. "And people were walking up to me and asking, 'Ah, man. Can I buy that?' I was like, 'Whoa!' That had never happened to me before."

For *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening, the initial appeal of the comically dysfunctional yet loving brood was rooted in Generation X fans' readiness to break from conservative family sitcom orthodoxy. "Traditionally, family entertainment was designed not to offend anybody," he explained in a 2000 *Newsweek* interview. "What we tried to do was go for a show jammed with smart jokes and intelligent references, as well as the more obvious sight gags that animation does so well. It turns out that you can actually pull that off. Everybody doesn't have to get every joke."

To understand the cult of *The Simpsons*, you have to go back to the rise of geek culture. During the '70s and '80s, attending a Star Trek, Doctor Who, or Star Wars convention was looked down upon by the mainstream as kids' stuff at best, and at worst a haven for nerds and social outcasts.

Groening—who grew up collecting *MAD* magazine and old EC comic books—and the equally geeky *Simpsons* staff, which over the years has included Jean, Cohen, and Oakley as well as Mimi Pond, John Swartzwelder, Mike Reiss, Jeff Martin, Conan O'Brien, David X. Cohen, Christine Nangle, and current showrunner Matt Selman, are all members of the same geek tribe.

Before it was cool, *The Simpsons* celebrated and affectionately lampooned fan culture—including Dungeons & Dragons, sci-fi, and prestige and trash television, as well as film classics, old-school horror flicks, Harry Potter books, rock-and-roll deities, highbrow literature, anime, and Lego toys. Being a *Simpsons* fanatic became a badge of honor for the "weird" kids who attended Comic-Con years before it exploded into a multimillion-dollar pop culture event in the 2000s.

Even Comic Book Guy, once a parody of *The Simpsons*' most over-the-top haters, has now become a beloved avatar for fanboys and fangirls, so much so that the writers gave him his own poignant origin story.

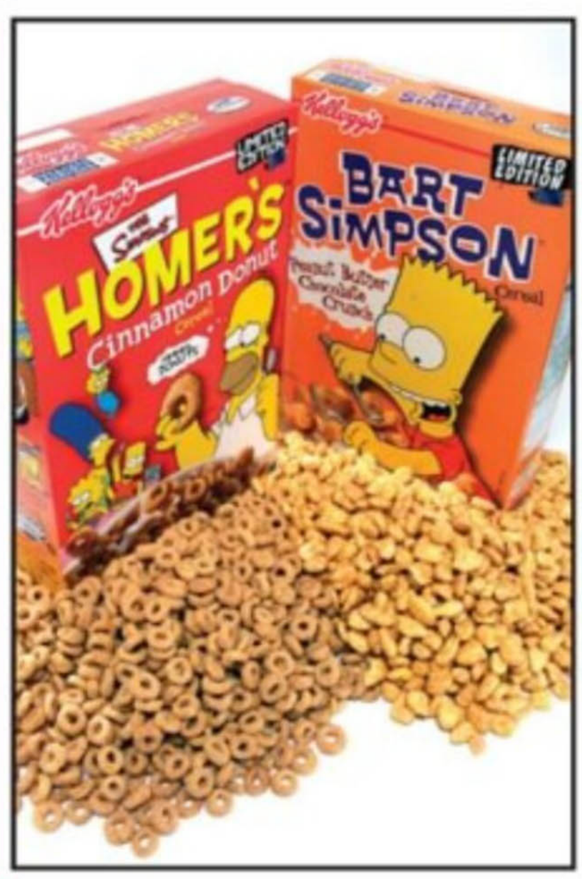
In the critically acclaimed Season 32 episode, "The

Dad-Feelings Limited," we find him contemplating having children with his wife Kumiko (voiced by Jenny Yokobori) and confronting his estranged relationship with emotionally distant father Postage Stamp Fellow (Dan Aykroyd). He sheds tears! It's a far cry from the laughably disagreeable, one-note Comic Book Guy fans grew up imitating.

These days, *Simpsons* fandom has been obscured in the wake of its louder, cooler, and significantly more profane children on *Family Guy*, *South Park,* and *Rick and Morty*. It's like trying to explain to a loyal apostle of LeBron James what Michael Jordan mania was like.

During its early '90s cultural peak, when 33.6 million viewers tuned in to watch the episode "Bart Gets an F," *The Simpsons* grossed billions in merchandise. And the appeal was transcendent. A 1990 *Washington Post* article reported on the explosion of bootleg Black Bart Simpson T-shirts: "Young Black folks across the country have adopted the wisecracking lad from *The Simpsons*—that wildly popular cartoon satire of white middle-class family life—as one of their own…."

Simpsons fans snatched up everything: dolls, action figures, board games, music, even rolling paper. The album *The Simpsons Sing the Blues* sold more than 2 million copies in the United States alone, spawning the radio hit "Do the Bartman." But there



has been some criticism for the record-breaking, long-running show that has seen its ratings decline like all other broadcast television shows in the age of streaming.

Let's start with one of the lazier critiques. Purists claim *The Simpsons* haven't had a good run since its 1996–97 season! And some have taken the claim to extremes: Mike Scully received disturbing death threats from unhinged fanatics on a fan site over his tenure as showrunner from 1997 to 2001. Jean was told to "die in a car crash."

A cursory search online will pull up think pieces, online fan posts, and YouTube videos from the last decade announcing the show's demise, with headlines including "*The Simpsons* Is 20 Years Past Its Creative High Point," "Who or What Ruined *The Simpsons*?," "*The Simpsons* Is Begging to End," and "How the Internet Killed *The Simpsons*."

The *Simpsons* crew has had mixed reactions to some of the fan angst. A diplomatic Groening responded in a 2018 *USA Today* interview. "I give a piece of advice to people who grew up with *The Simpsons* and maybe think it's not for them anymore," he said. "Check it out again: The satire and the quality of animation are fantastic." He added, "I'm really proud of the group's efforts."

But in a *Hollywood Reporter* oral history celebrating the 25th anniversary of "The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show" in 2022, Yeardley Smith, the voice of Lisa Simpson, did not hold her tongue. "My feeling today is most people say, 'The show hasn't been good since Season 10.' And it's like, f--k you," she bristled. "The piece that goes along with a comment like that is, 'I can't believe they don't try anymore.' That is so offensive to me. You'll never meet more hardworking writers, animators, and actors than at *The Simpsons*."

Over the years, the show has been a lucrative licensing brand with ubiquitous tie-ins, including JetBlue (the "official airline of Springfield" to promote The Simpsons Movie *in 2007), Crocs, Lego, and more.*

Jean has a philosophical take on some of the "*Simpsons* is not as good as it used to be" talk among the diehards. "I've experienced it from the outside as a Star Wars fan, and as a Marvel fan, too," he says. "You love something, and then you find you are protective of it. You start going, 'No, they shouldn't do that with that character…it should be this way.' Every fan of every big genre, that's what they are like."

The sobering truth is that *The Simpsons* is in uncharted territory. Recently, the show has been enjoying a resurgence. Noted Jesse David Fox in a glowing 2023 Vulture piece, "the former members of the No Homers Club fan community, infamous for complaining about the decline of the show, agree that *The Simpsons*, in 2023, is undergoing a renaissance."

The most recent "Treehouse of Horror" episode, featuring a knockout parody of the Edgar Allan Poe story "The Fall of the House of Usher," would make the most cantankerous *Simpsons* fan's heart grow three sizes. And after more than three decades, Jean still gets excited when he talks about future episodes. "I wrote one coming up on Bart's first prank, about the origins of his misbehavior," he says in the voice of 12-year-old kid geeking out over his newest manga. "So yeah, we are always looking for new ways to explore these characters that people love so much." □

Following the success of The Simpsons, *animated shows that have flourished in prime time include* Family Guy, Beavis and Butt-Head, *and* Bob's Burgers.

How *The Simpsons* Sparked a Cartoon Renaissance

The show kick-started a new wave of prime time animation, paving the way for hits like *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and *Bojack Horseman*.

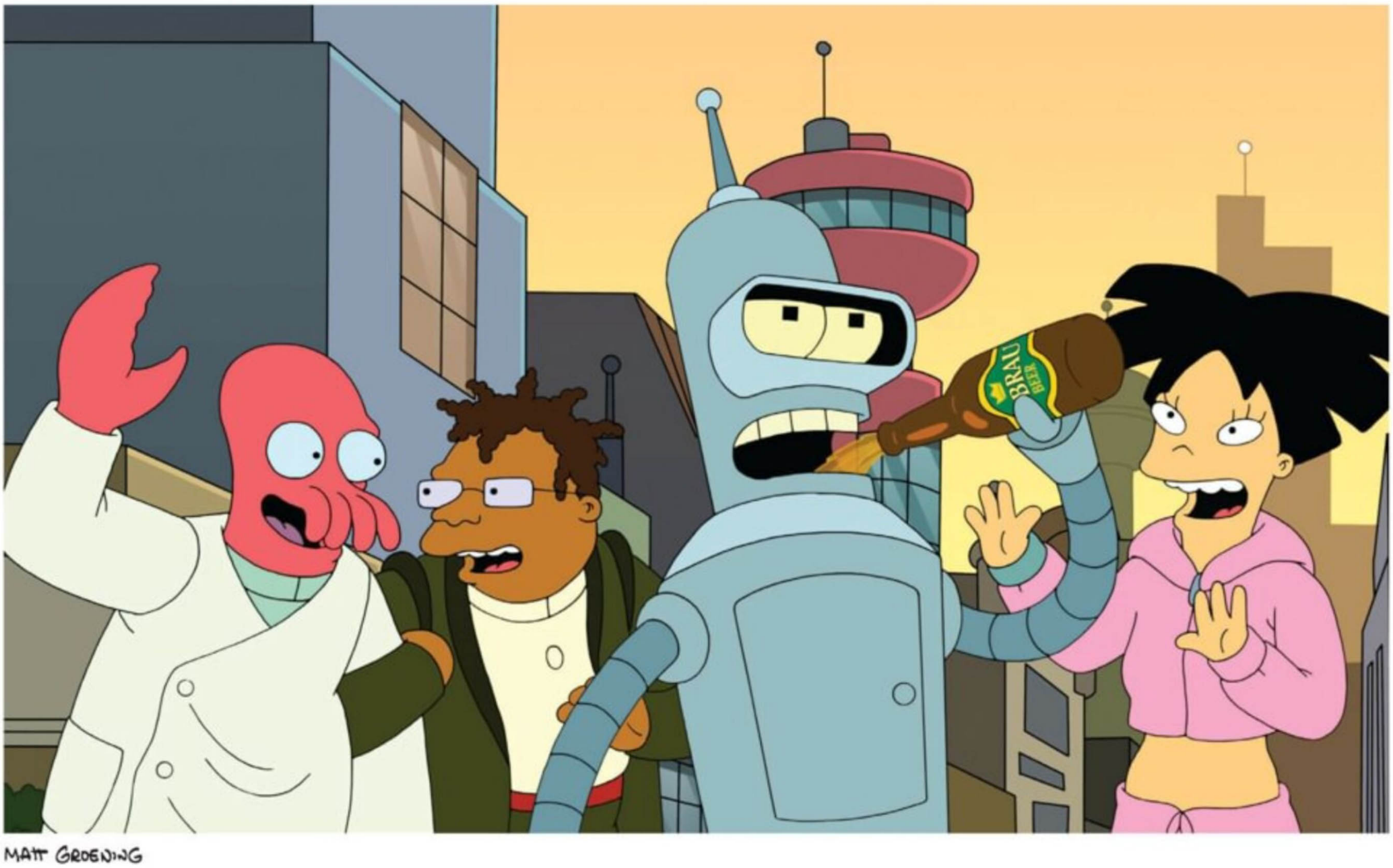
BY MARISA ROFFMAN

IN HOLLYWOOD, IMITATION ISN'T JUST THE sincerest form of flattery—it's often the business model. And not long after *The Simpsons*' breakout debut on Fox in late 1989, other TV networks got to work looking for their own animated hits—initially with very mixed results.

Thanks to the long lead time traditionally needed for animation projects, it took a couple of seasons before competing networks could try their hand at the format. And ultimately, none lasted long: ABC's *Capitol Critters* ran for seven episodes following its January 1992 premiere, CBS' *Fish Police* lasted for three episodes after its February 1992 debut, and *Family Dog* ran for a single season during the summer of 1993.

"Animation is a very expensive form, and it's difficult to produce because it requires a lot of lead time," Perry Simon, then the executive vice president of prime time programs for NBC (which was the only network without an animated series at the time), told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1992. "I think that in the event all the post-*Simpsons* animated shows fail, you will find a period where networks will tend to shy away from them."

That prediction turned out to be true. Though Fox dabbled in airing its Fox Kids programming (including *Batman: The Animated Series*) in prime time, it took until 1995 before it aired another adult animated show. *The Critic*, created by *Simpsons* executive producers Al Jean, Mike Reiss, and James L. Brooks, followed the life of a film critic (voiced



Adult animated hits include (clockwise, from above): Futurama *(from Matt Groening),* Big Mouth, Rick and Morty, Archer, *and* The Cleveland Show.

by Jon Lovitz). The first season had aired on ABC in 1994, but the network quickly pulled the plug. Fox saved the show, briefly placing it behind *The Simpsons*, but *The Critic* was canceled again at the end of its second season.

In the mid-'90s, Fox met with up-and-coming animators Trey Parker and Matt Stone about a show they were developing, but "They told us it will never work," Parker told *Details* magazine of the duo's *South Park* pitch. "The advice we got was, 'It should be three boys and a girl. One of the kids has to be Black or Mexican.'" The duo also bristled at the suggestion that the kids' families be introduced. Instead, in 1997, the show—featuring the raucous adventures of four Colorado schoolboys—went to Comedy Central, where it has been a monumental hit and continues to run.

MTV had the most success in the 1990s, launching shows like *Beavis and Butt-Head* (about a pair of teenage slackers) and its spinoff, *Daria*, which led Fox to encourage creator Mike Judge to develop an animated series that could pair with *The Simpsons*. Working with *Simpsons* vet Greg Daniels, he came up with *King of the Hill*, a comedy centered on a middle-aged propane salesman. "After one of those crazy meetings, I came up with the brilliant idea of doing a show that I'd actually want to watch—which was kind of a radical thing," Judge told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2006. "It was win-win. If they liked it, I'd get to do the show. If they didn't, I'd get paid this huge amount of money not to do anything."

King of the Hill turned out to be a ratings winner, which encouraged Fox to reinvest in animation, ordering a trio of shows that bowed in 1999: stop-motion animated sitcom *The PJs* (co-created by Eddie Murphy); Matt Groening's *Futurama*, a sci-fi comedy set in the 30th century; and Seth MacFarlane's irreverent *Family Guy*.

MacFarlane was a fan of *The Simpsons* and credits the show for its influence on his work. "It had sort of laid the groundwork, sort of paved the way for subsequent animated shows," he told IGN in 2003. "They sort of established the new method of doing prime time animation. I was very excited about pitching to Fox, and everyone that I dealt with there just seemed really cool."

Though *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* have traded barbs on and off screen over the years as Fox's two longest-running and most successful animated shows, "the rivalry is very affectionate," Groening told the A.V. Club in 2006. "Seth MacFarlane, the creator of *Family Guy*, is a good guy, and he does great work, and I certainly have no problem with the perceived competition." (The two shows even crossed over in the 2014 hour-long *Family Guy* special "The Simpsons Guy.")

Futurama had a four-season run and *Family Guy* ended after three seasons, though both would later show remarkable resilience in a competitive TV landscape.

Cable continued to be a welcoming space for animation in the early 2000s. Cartoon Network used a revival of the live-action/animated hybrid talk show parody *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* to launch a new late-night block, Adult Swim, in 2001. Like many before him, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* co-creator Mike Lazzo was inspired by what he saw on *The Simpsons*. "When *The Simpsons* premiered on TV, I could not believe my eyes. I marveled at it," Lazzo, who was also the head of programming for Cartoon Network, told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2002.

Adult Swim found success with original titles like *Robot Chicken*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force,* and *Rick and Morty,* along with highly rated reruns of *Family Guy*. That syndicated success for *Family Guy* (along with the show's strong DVD sales) led Fox to order more new episodes.

Futurama, meanwhile, earned a revival on Comedy Central in 2009 following its syndicated tenure, running for an additional three seasons. The series was revived again, by Hulu in 2023, and has been renewed through (at least) an 11th season.

In 2005, Fox opted to go all-in on the format. The network launched its Animation Domination block in May of that year with *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, the return of *Family Guy*, and the time period premiere of MacFarlane's new series *American Dad!* (centered on brash and conservative CIA agent Stan Smith and his family), as well as the live-action comedy *Malcolm in the Middle*.

The Animation Domination block would run for nine years, becoming home to short-lived shows like *Allen Gregory*, *Napoleon Dynamite,* and *Sit Down, Shut Up*, as well as the four-season run of *Family Guy* spinoff *The Cleveland Show* and *Bob's Burgers*, featuring a quirky family that runs a burger joint.

Since its 2011 debut, *Bob's Burgers* has been *The Simpsons*' spiritual sibling in many ways, despite no overt creative connection. Creator Loren Bouchard told *Variety* in 2009 that *Bob's Burgers* was inspired by Fox's animation brand being centered on family shows, combined with his own desire to tell a workplace comedy. Like *The Simpsons*, *Bob's*—which is heading into its 16th season—focuses on a family with three kids. The opening title sequence features multiple elements that change every week (similar to *The Simpsons*' couch gag and chalkboard), and a feature film was released in 2022.

When Fox opted to end *American Dad!* in 2014, the network dropped the branded night altogether. But the Smith family has had its own happy ending: The series quickly moved to TBS, where it ran for more than a decade before being reacquired by Fox for an additional four seasons beginning in 2025.

Animation Domination made a comeback in 2019, including shows like *The Great North*, *Krapopolis*, *Grimsburg*, *Universal Basic Guys*, *Bless the Harts*, *Duncanville,* and *HouseBroken*. With so many animated shows on its roster, Fox briefly expanded its animated footprint with a block on Monday nights in 2021 and briefly moved *Family Guy* to Wednesdays in 2024.

Fox's sister cable channel FX got its own long-running series with the 2009 launch of *Archer*, a comedy about a highly dysfunctional team of secret agents. *Archer* eventually moved to another sibling network, FXX, where it completed its 14-season run in 2023.

Netflix ventured into original programming in the 2010s, but the streaming service was hesitant to dive into the animation world. "Initially, we

South Park *(below) has aired more than 300 episodes.* King of the Hill *(opposite) ran on Fox between 1997 and 2009 and was revived with new episodes on Hulu in 2025.*

could not get Netflix to look at the show because they weren't buying animation," *BoJack Horseman* executive producer Noel Bright told Vulture in 2018. "The feeling was once they said yes to an animated pitch, then they'd have to hear a pitch from every other animation producer in town—and they weren't set up for that. They were still really so new that it wasn't their focus."

Netflix ultimately ordered a *BoJack* pilot (and eventual series order) thanks in part to a voice cast that included Will Arnett and Aaron Paul, stars of two shows that had done well on the platform, *Arrested Development* and *Breaking Bad*, respectively.

BoJack, featuring a part-man, part-horse lead character who was an actor battling mental health issues, was still a big swing. But creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg credited *The Simpsons* as a key to finding the right balance within his own work while talking to Public Radio International in 2017. "[The] biggest [impact] is the way they were able to tell sometimes sad stories in ways that didn't sacrifice comedy," he said, citing an episode in which Homer realized he'd have to give up his dream job to support his expanding family. "And to tell funny stories in ways that didn't sacrifice character and sacrifice the emotions."

The success of *BoJack Horseman* led to Netflix becoming a home for dozens of adult animated television projects, including raunchy middle-school romp *Big Mouth* (which ran for seven seasons and got a spinoff), Groening's medieval comedy *Disenchantment,* and *F Is for Family*, co-created by *The Simpsons*' Michael Price.

Fellow streamers Prime Video and Apple TV+ followed suit. Apple TV+ debuted *Central Park* (from *Bob's Burgers*' Bouchard) within a year of its platform launch. Prime has leaned into the genre element of adult animation with *Invincible*, based on a Robert Kirkman-created superhero comic book, and fantasy series *The Legend of Vox Machina*.

Of course, no show has benefited more from the success of *The Simpsons* than *The Simpsons* itself. While its broadcast home remains (at least through a 40th season) on Fox, the series has produced multiple digital shorts and exclusive episodes for Disney+. As showrunner Matt Selman told Give Me My Remote in 2024, "They all know that more *Simpsons* is good for business." □

Ahead of Its Time

Over the years, the show has had an uncanny ability to look into the future, predicting scandals, technological advances, and the presidency of Donald Trump.

BY MEGAN MCCLUSKEY

THE SIMPSONS IS UNDENIABLY A television phenomenon. Both the longest-running American sitcom and animated program, the critically acclaimed cartoon is widely recognized as one of (if not the) best shows of all time for its humorous satire of everything from politics and pop culture to everyday family life. In fact, throughout its nearly 800 episodes, the writers have been so on top of the country's cultural pulse that they've even managed to predict several major historical events—along with a few less momentous happenings.

Autocorrect Fails

SEASON 6, EPISODE 8: "LISA ON ICE"

PREDICTED: 1994/CAME TRUE: 2007

••• During a school assembly at Springfield Elementary, Kearney asks fellow bully Dolph to take a memo to "Beat up Martin" on his "Newton"—Apple's early attempt at a personal digital assistant. However, the machine translates the message into "Eat up Martha" instead, foreshadowing the common messaging errors people blame on iPhone's autocorrect technology.

In fact, Nitin Ganatra, Apple's former director of engineering for iOS applications, revealed in 2013 that the *Simpsons* gag served as a rallying cry for developing the software for the iPhone's keyboard. "If you heard people talking and they used the words 'Eat up Martha,' it was basically a reference to the fact that we needed to nail the keyboard. We needed to make sure the text input works on this thing—otherwise, 'Here comes the Eat up Marthas,'" he told *Fast Company*.

FaceTime and Smartwatches

SEASON 6, EPISODE 19: "LISA'S WEDDING"

PREDICTED: 1995/CAME TRUE: 2010 AND 2014

••• In this futuristic installment, Lisa talks with

The Simpsons' *forecasting of a female president has yet to come true, but a 2000 episode predicted Donald Trump's time in the White House.*

Over the years, the show has anticipated corruption in soccer (above) as well as various scientific, technological, and political moments (opposite).

Marge using her phone's video chat capability, predating the popular FaceTime feature of today's iPhones by 15 years.

In the same episode, when Lisa visits a fortune-teller at a Renaissance fair, viewers are transported 15 years into the future to 2010, a time when wristwatch communication technology exists. However, even the *Simpsons*' future society was a little ahead of its time, as modern voice recognition–enabled smartwatches weren't rolled out until 2014.

Faulty Voter Machines

SEASON 20, EPISODE 4:
"TREEHOUSE OF HORROR XIX"
PREDICTED: 2008/CAME TRUE: 2012

••• In a bit inspired by the 2008 presidential election, Homer tries to vote for Barack Obama, only to have a voting machine record his selection as John McCain several times. Coincidentally, when it came time for Obama to run for a second term in 2012, video footage emerged of a Pennsylvania machine switching a vote from Obama to one for his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney. The machine was reportedly taken out of commission.

The God Particle

SEASON 10, EPISODE 2:
"THE WIZARD OF EVERGREEN TERRACE"
PREDICTED: 1998/CAME TRUE: 2012

••• The existence of the Higgs boson, or "God particle," which helps explain how everything in the universe has mass, wasn't confirmed by physicists until 2012. But according to Simon Singh, the author of *The Simpsons and Their Mathematical Secrets*, after Homer decides to become an inventor in "The Wizard of Evergreen Terrace," he is pictured standing in front of a blackboard with an equation that predicts the mass of the yet-to-be-discovered particle. "If you work it out, you get the mass of a Higgs boson that's only a bit larger than the nano-mass of a Higgs boson actually is," Singh told the *Independent*. "It's kind of amazing, as Homer makes this prediction 14 years before it was discovered."

The NSA Spying Scandal

THE SIMPSONS MOVIE

PREDICTED: 2007/CAME TRUE: 2013

●●● When the Simpson family is forced to go into hiding following their escape from the EPA biodome enclosing Springfield, the NSA locates Marge and the kids by listening in on one of their conversations. However, it wasn't until six years after *The Simpsons Movie* hit theaters that Edward Snowden first blew the whistle on government mass surveillance of Americans' phone and internet records.

The FIFA Corruption Scandal

SEASON 25, EPISODE 16:

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIVE LIKE A REFEREE"

PREDICTED: 2014/CAME TRUE: 2015

●●● Although the world football (soccer) federation representative who asks Homer for help repairing the organization's image isn't explicitly named as a member of FIFA, his arrest turned out to be uncannily similar to those of the real-life FIFA officials who were arrested on corruption charges about a year later. In addition, the episode correctly predicted Germany's defeat of Brazil in the 2014 World Cup.

Greece's Debt Default

SEASON 23, EPISODE 10:

"POLITICALLY INEPT, WITH HOMER SIMPSON"

PREDICTED: 2012/CAME TRUE: 2015

●●● When Homer appears as a guest commentator on cable news show *Head Butt*, a ticker runs across the bottom of the screen that reads, "Europe puts Greece on eBay." Of course, this was three years before Greece became the first developed country to default to the International Monetary Fund, plunging the country deeper into economic crisis.

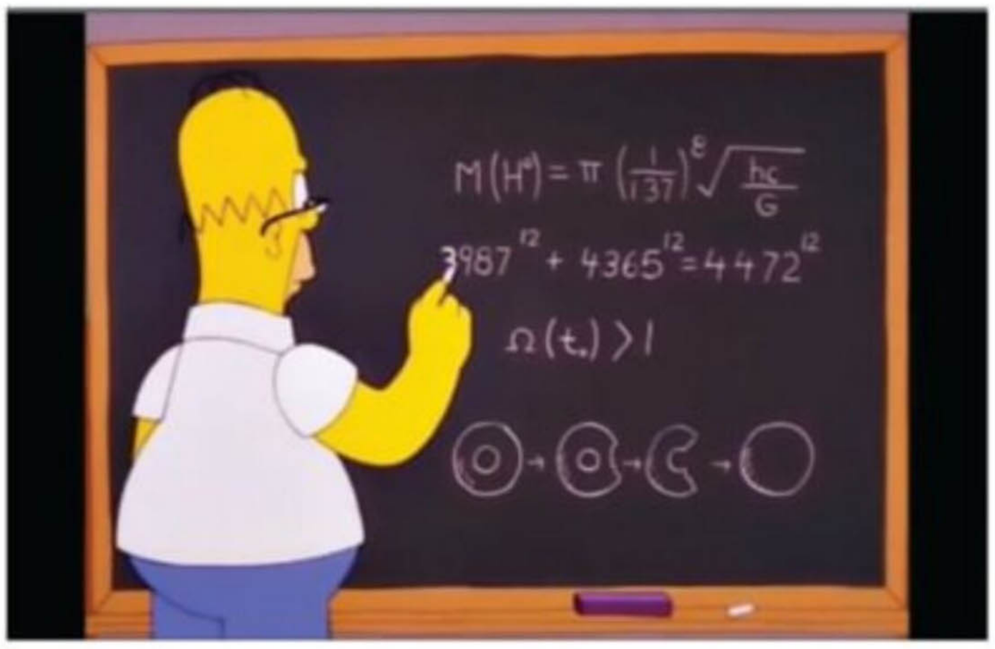
The Nobel Prize

SEASON 22, EPISODE 1:

"ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MUSICAL"

PREDICTED: 2010/CAME TRUE: 2016

●●● Bengt Holmström may not have won the Nobel Prize in Economics until 2016, but one *Simpsons* character was betting on him six years prior. In a scene from the Season 22 premiere in which Martin holds up a scorecard depicting his Nobel Prize betting pool



MATT GROENING

In a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, a 2012 episode presaged by three years Greece's default on a payment to the International Monetary Fund.

with Lisa, Milhouse, and Database, the MIT professor is clearly marked in one of Milhouse's squares.

President Donald Trump

SEASON 11, EPISODE 17: "BART TO THE FUTURE"
PREDICTED: 2000/CAME TRUE: 2016

••• When Bart flashes forward into adulthood, viewers learn that Lisa not only becomes president but inherits "quite a budget crunch" from her predecessor, Donald Trump. "The country is broke?" she asks her aides in one scene. "How can that be?" The Trump presidency was still 16 years away at the time. However, in a 2016 interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, writer Dan Greaney explained the joke was meant as a warning to the country. "That just seemed like the logical last stop before hitting bottom," he said. "It was pitched because it was consistent with the vision of America going insane."

Drogon's Fiery Rampage on *Game of Thrones*

SEASON 29, EPISODE 1: "THE SERFSONS"
PREDICTED: 2017/CAME TRUE: 2019

••• This episode sees Homer, Marge, and the rest of the gang finding themselves in the kingdom of Springfieldia, an alternate fantasy universe that parodied many aspects of life in Westeros on *Game of Thrones*. There is even a fire-breathing dragon that burns down the Serfsons' village, much like Drogon (acting at Daenerys' behest) ended up doing to King's Landing in the penultimate *Game of Thrones* episode, "The Bells."

COVID-19 (and Murder Hornets)

SEASON 4, EPISODE 21: "MARGE IN CHAINS"
PREDICTED: 1993/CAME TRUE: 2020

••• Not only does this episode—aired 27 years before the COVID-19 pandemic began—feature an unprecedented flu sweeping through Springfield, but when the townspeople begin rioting to demand a cure for the virus, a swarm of killer bees that could be likened to the "murder hornets" that hit the U.S. around the same time unexpectedly come into the picture.

On the other hand, episode cowriter Bill Oakley told *The Hollywood Reporter* in March 2020 that any comparisons to coronavirus that the storyline seems to invite are purely coincidental. "There are very few cases where *The Simpsons* predicted something," he said. "It's mainly just coincidence, because the episodes are so old that history repeats itself. Most of these episodes are based on things that happened in the '60s, '70s, or '80s that we knew about." □

TIME

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THE SIMPSONS

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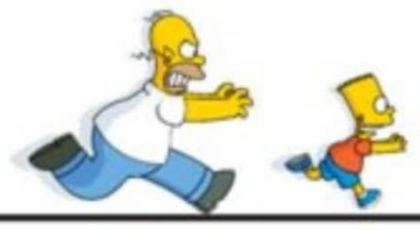

BY THE NUMBERS

Thirty-six seasons add up to a lot of episodes, characters, and awards—but fewer fingers than you might expect.

790

Episodes (786 on Fox, plus four on Disney+).

4.5 BILLION-PLUS

Hours the show has been streamed by Disney+ subscribers globally as of May 2025.

APRIL 29, 2018

The date *The Simpsons* aired its 636th episode, passing the Western show *Gunsmoke* (1955–75) as the longest-running scripted prime time TV series.

$847.63

The price that rings up on the supermarket register when the cashier scans Maggie in the show's original opening title sequence. (More recent episodes value her at $243.26, double the price of Marge's grocery bill.)

175,145

Separate designs in *The Simpsons'* animators database, including 66,143 character designs, 50,889 background designs, and 58,113 prop designs.

37

Emmy Awards won by the show, including outstanding voice-over performance for every member of the main cast: Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith, Hank Azaria, and Harry Shearer.

4

Fingers every character has on each hand, with one major exception. God—who has appeared in several episodes—has five on each hand.

MATT GROENING

Long Live the Simpsons

Edgy, witty, and relentlessly hilarious, TV's longest-running prime time series is a pop-culture institution. The animated antics of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie, and their Springfield neighbors have kept us laughing for nearly 800 episodes. They're not nearly done yet.